Part 1. Calm

Every once in a while I get this headache that wraps around the back of my eye. It feels like it's choking it, like a brain worm pulsing and bracing itself against the muscles, devouring my sight and my ability to think. I have to miss work when it happens. I don't know what causes it, the doctor says I should drink more water.

Today my eye doesn't hurt so bad so I decide to get up and get to work. It's gonna be a long shift at Popeman's, and I don't feel prepared in the slightest. I get out of bed and swing myself across the room. I puff resin in my pipe. I'm out of weed. The resin doesn't feel like enough. My apartment stinks now. I start the kettle and go to the mirror.

That's me. Ugly, grotesque, disgusting. Everyone can see it. I brush my hair, put on makeup, adjust my posture and feel my back crack. The bed I sleep in isn't long enough for me to lay down all the way in it, and my tits get in the way of what would be comfortable positions. I put on some music, something about the way she talks to me and the way it makes me feel. I clean out my ears and the sight of the wax on my fingertip makes me want to gag. I look back to the mirror. Presentable. Good as it's gonna get. Good enough for the kids.

I put on pantyhose. My legs look a lot better with pantyhose on, but they're always a bit too short for me. I press them and stretch them until they hug my crotch better. I crack my neck a couple of times after hanging it low for so long. When I look forward I have a moment where I feel faint, then I'm better. I put on my skirt and my uniform shirt. My hat is a knock off of the ones they have at In-n-out, it makes me feel like a cheap pinup model.

When I get in the car it's already pouring rain. No one is gonna come to Popeman's today unless they're an asshole and an idiot. My car is a 2002 Subaru Outback Impreza. Her name is Sharon, she has 40,000 miles on her, and she is the love of my life. Her bubblegum amoxicillin syrup pink paint looks perfect in the clouds. My makeup is all but ruined. I'm not allowed to wear a jacket at work, not even when I'm going into the building. She took one of mine when I tried to walk in with it. It's such bullshit. So, today my makeup is gonna run and I'm gonna be soaked before I come in. And Georgina can just deal.

When I pull up, it's pouring even harder. I park and wait a second before running out with my umbrella to the door. I get hit by a gust of wind and feel like the umbrella is gonna slip from my hands again, sending me running like a fat kid after a soccer ball.

Georgina is there when I get inside. She's got this look on her face that she always gets when she's pissed off. "You can't keep being late, Rodney," she says, and my heart sinks.

I clear my throat. "It's Louise," I say, taking off my jacket and putting it on my hook.

"It's not your legal name," she says.

“Look, we’ve been over this. I’m Louise. Just because you’re transphobic doesn’t mean that I’m gonna show up earlier. It’s pouring rain anyway.”

She gets closer to me and puts her hands on her hips. “Just because you’re friends with Jim’s kid doesn’t mean I gotta put up with your shit, you know? ‘Louise?’” she says, doing air quotes.

“Just leave me alone, how about that, Georgie? Let me get started.”

Georgina looks at me for a second. I look back at her. “Did you see a doctor about your headaches?”

“Yeah, I did,” I say back, brushing water off my skirt and sitting down.

She holds her hand out, “let me see it.”

“Ugh, really? It’s the same as last time, they don’t believe that there’s anything wrong with me,”

I hand over the doctor’s note.

She reads it, “‘self reported severe headaches’. Why do I expect anything else? You know, I don’t believe that there’s anything wrong with you either. I think this is just what you do when you want to sit around for a little while.”

“No, it’s real I promise, they just never take me serious at the doctors, they just say I’m under stress or that I need to eat more.”

“You do need to eat more. Look at you, you’re thin as a pole.”

I want to be shot.

“Look, I gotta go to the bathroom,” I say, “so let me be alright, don’t go talking through the door again.”

“Alright,” she says, “but only because I know you’re a rat.”

The bathrooms at Popeman’s are always disgusting, no matter how many times I had to clean them. There was tiling that was falling apart and graffiti all over the place and 2 of the toilets were often clogged and needed to be snaked. I walked into a spider web that had a cockroach twitching in it. I sit on the toilet and light a cigarette. I noodle around in my purse and check on the cash stores. 3 knocking around and another 31 in the wallet. Oof. Near dry. Next check won’t be much, I keep missing shifts. I drag my cigarette and stand up, I flush the toilet and tuck my dick between my legs to make sure that the outfit looks good.

When I come out Georgina tells me she wants me to get on the floor and start taking orders. There’s no one out there when I get there. There was no one even on the register. The whole place is empty except for me, Georgina, and the cook who is picking his nose and playing snake on his phone. The rain is pouring, and I lean on the counter and stretch my legs. The pain around my eye is starting to come back.

Popeman’s serves burgers, fries, chicken fingers, soda, salad, and tacos. We serve these every day, rain or shine, 24 hours, with a smile. Today is day 214 of working at Popeman’s, and I don’t know

how much longer I can take it. But rent is in 2 days, and I don't get paid for 3 days, so I have to find a way to bridge this gap. I look up from the counter. Some kid is standing there, looking at me like a creep. I stand up straight, "hey, welcome to Popeman's, how can I help you?"

"Uhm, hi, can I have a cheeseburger and chicken finger combo?" The kid stands there nervous. His friend is waiting behind him. They look like middle schoolers, skaters, they hold their boards in their right hand.

"6.49," I say.

"6.49?" the kid responds, "Since when?"

"It's been 6.49 the whole time I've worked here, kid."

"Jeez, just the chicken fingers then."

"4, 6, or 8."

"8."

"1.50"

"That's better. Jeez, try to charge me 6.49, think I'm a fool."

"Whatever kid, pay up."

The kid pulls a load of quarters out of his left pocket. He lays out 6 on the counter. I pick them up and put them in the register. "And .20 tax." He gives me one more, "And here's your change." I hand him back a nickel.

"I can't believe you would extort a child like this," the kid says, taking his receipt. I hear the cook putting the chicken fingers in the fryer.

"Shut up and sit down before I tell your mother where you are."

"My mom knows where I am," he said, pulling out his Razr.

I sigh and walk to the back. I say hi to the cook, and go to my locker. I have 3 things in there to pass time, my discman, a crossword book, and that copy of Pride and Prejudice I've had knocking around since I graduated. I take the crosswords. I walk back to the front and the kids are laughing and talking about skating and tricks they want to learn and looking at the pictures they took earlier at the park under the overpass. The kid who stood behind the one who ordered has a bandage on his arm from road rash. They're waiting and waiting and I haven't even looked at the crossword yet. I see one of them notice me, then he turns back to the other one, and now both of them are looking at me. They go back into their little group and now they're whispering. I stop looking at them. I sit in my chair and start on my crosswords. I hate crosswords. I got this book from Georgina when I complained to her about how no one ever comes when it rains and how I sit around waiting for just 5 or 10 people to show up across a 6 hour shift. She gave it to me and that was all. There is no drive through at Popeman's, we are the only fast food restaurant in the whole of the Northern Parkway that still doesn't have one. It rains most days. I don't know how Jim keeps the place open.

The cook dings his bell and the chicken fingers are done. He goes back to playing snake on his phone. I pick up the food and put it on the counter. “Chicken fingers, 111”

The same kid who ordered comes up to get the food. “Hey, you know, you’re really pretty. We should go out sometime,” the kid puts his number on the counter and takes the chicken fingers back to the table. His friend has his mouth wide open like he’s barrelling laughter but he’s not actually making any noise. When the kid gets back to his table his friend gives him a high five. I roll my eyes and walk away. I’m tired already. The rain won’t stop pouring.

The kids stick around after their meal. They play little games at their table and flick paper at each other. I sit in my chair just next to the counter, just out of sight where I can have a moment of feigned privacy. I’m doing my crosswords. I don’t know any trivia, so I can’t figure out any of the answers. When I finally get one, I think to myself, the rest of the puzzle will get easier. But I already looked at all the prompts, and I don’t know any of them, so I just stare at all of them for a while. The empty puzzle. I look at the clock. It’s barely noon. No one else has shown up. I have to be here for 6 more hours.

The kids are getting restless, they’ve been here an hour and the rain still hasn’t stopped. They’re sitting there doing much of nothing. That’s when Georgina decides to come up to me, she says, “what the hell do you think you’re doing sitting around? Get up and clean something.”

I look up at her and give her a squint with her iridescent backdrop half blinding me, “Clean what? There’s only even been one customer.”

“Clean something, clean the bathrooms.”

My heart sinks. “I’m not cleaning the bathrooms, it’s disgusting.”

“That’s why they need to be cleaned.”

“No way, you need a biohazard team to clear up that kind of job. I don’t get paid 7.15 an hour to get hepatitis.”

“You listen to me you little bitch,” there’s something nice about being insulted in a way that affirms your gender, “I am your boss, and you will listen to me, get it? Get it you little wimp? Now get your ass to the janitor’s closet and get started cleaning those fucking bathrooms.”

I look down at my crossword puzzles. Then I look back up at her. Then I look at the bathrooms. All of a sudden it doesn’t feel like I’m in my body anymore, I feel like I’m watching my life as a movie, I feel like I’m looking at the back of my own head and seeing all the flyaways and split ends from dying it black, god if I’m not disgusting. I guess the bathroom is where I belong then.

So I’m sitting in this theater and I see myself say, “Yes ma’am,” like a servant and I get up and go over to the janitor's closet. I watch myself get out toilet bowl cleaner, scouring pads, soap scum remover, the mop and that squeeze bucket, I’m loading it all up and goddamn if I don’t just look like a man doing it. Why don’t my tits want to grow beyond a B cup? Better get that implant money. I scream at the screen, “Get that implant money bitch!” and that makes me feel good. I like putting others down.

I watch myself clean the mens and then the womens, I clean them both inadequately and then wash my hands and leave back to my station. Each seemed to be coated entirely in a good smattering of shit. I watch myself sit down and this usher tells me to get out of the theater, I didn't pay to see this part. I get up and leave and then I'm back in my body and there's Georgina. She says, "That's really all you can do?" and I say, "yeah." She shakes her head and walks away.

I stare at the crossword for a little while, then I look at the clock. It's 2 now. I can't believe I spent 2 hours in the shit room. Now I stink. Halfway done.

The cook is still playing that game on his phone. I decide to go talk to him. There's no one in the store at all now. "Hey Louise, you just take a fat shit man?"

My eyes went a little dead when he called me man, "no I just cleaned those disgusting bathrooms," I say in my best girl voice.

"Yeah, sure bro," I want to rip his throat out.

I walk to get my copy of pride and prejudice. I'm halfway through. There's so much drama if you read past all the 1700s bullshit. You can just read all the dialogue and you get this crazy ass story. I'm trying my best to understand everything that's going on when someone comes in from the rain.

My first thought is he looks kinda shifty. He doesn't have a rain jacket or an umbrella or anything, he's just sopping wet. He comes out to me at the counter.

"Hey there sweetie, let me get, um, let me get the chicken fingers and the cheeseburger combo."

He called me sweetie. It was the nicest thing anyone had said to me in a couple weeks, "Yes sir, that'll be 6.49."

"Now, did you just say 6.49?"

"Yes, it is 6.49 for a meal."

"6.49, now how the hell do you charge that when a 4 piece chicken finger is .80 and a cheeseburger is 1.25?"

"I don't set the prices. The meal comes with a drink."

He looks up at the menu for a minute. "No ma'am I think you're wrong, look at this." He points up to the menu, "you're trying to charge me for the family meal, that's 6.49, I want the chicken finger and cheeseburger meal, that's priced at 2.15. Comes with a 4 piece chicken finger and a cheeseburger, with a small drink. See there?"

I feel like the world's biggest dumbass. I have been triple charging people for that meal every single time they've ordered it for almost a year now. No wonder everyone complains and argues. "I'm sorry sir, you're right. Let me ring that in for you." I feel like crying and/or dying, whichever would have the most comedic effect.

And he was so nice too, and he gendered me correctly the whole time and he called me ma'am. And I was gonna triple charge him for his chicken fingers. I ring it to the chef. He drops the chicken fingers in

the fryer and a patty in the patty warmer. All patties here are precooked and frozen, and we have a sort of oven that we use to thaw them out and get them ready to go on burgers.
The food is ready. I read it out, “Chicken finger and cheeseburger meal, 112.”
The man gets his food. “Thank you ma’am, I’ll see you another time.” And he winks and I blush. I would’ve let him take me on that filthy linoleum.
It’s about 3:30 when Jim comes in. He comes in banging around and acting crazy like he always does. Jim does a lot of coke. So do I. We both get it from his son. He’s a relatively small dealer, but we certainly take up some of his supply every time he gets more. The man who was here for his food leaves with it into the rain. I think he’s homeless.
Jim is the biggest fan of pop punk. He started listening to it in the late 90s, and he still listens to some of the emo and shit that’s coming out nowadays. He even does his hair like one of the guys from Fall Out Boy, with one of those black skin tight v-necks. My headache is starting to come back.
“You going to the MCR show? I saw them at warped tour they’re actually pretty good. It’s like vampire music.”
“I’m not a vampire Jim.”
“Ha. I know that.” He holds his fist out. There’s a little bump of coke sitting there in the nook between his thumb, his fingers, and his palm. I sniff it quick.
I snort wildly, “ah, fuck, goddamn it.”
“What, you ain’t had none today?”
“No, not yet,” I say, “fuck, are you sure that’s pure?”
“It’s from Mark, I always just trust Mark.”
“Fuck, I hope he hasn’t started cutting it with something.”
“He always cuts it,” he says, “maybe he’s cutting it with something different.”
“And you don’t see the problem there?”
“Why would I? You’re not gonna get it any better from someone else.”
I hold my head back. My sinuses are on fire and I feel like snot is about to start leaking out of my nose. Jim leans against the counter. He looks me up and down. “So how’s it been around here?”
I keep my eyes closed. “Slow as ever. Still no drive through, so still no customers. We got a couple skaters and a homeless guy. That was it. Sold about 4 worth of merchandise.”
“Ah, business will pick back up soon. We always get big rushes when it’s pony lamp season.”
Pony lamp season is a cultural littering event that takes place every year in Junestadt. We make these paper lamps that are shaped like horses and then we let them out over the lake. Some of them go out in the lake, but some float off for miles. 2 years ago there was a statewide wildfire that started because someone just made their pony with too much candle and it lit a field and then a forest and then a couple towns. It didn’t come back to bite us though, somehow.

“Pony lamps don’t come around til the summer. It’s September. That’s a whole other year.”
“Say, you want to come to mine tonight? I just got some, and we can have a little party.”
Jim always gives me the creeps when he says he wants to party with me. I always feel like he’s gonna give me heroin instead of coke and I’m gonna spend the rest of my night getting bruises and rope burn on the inside of my asshole. He doesn’t seem like the kind of guy that would even have the courtesy to use lube.
“Jim, I don’t know man, I don’t know how appropriate that is.”
“What, it’s just like when we’re at work. Only we can hang out longer.”
“I just don’t know if that’s something I want to do.”
“Why not? Ok, look, alright Louise, I just think you’re a cool person. I want to be your friend, alright. You can invite other people. You can even invite Mark if you want.”
Mark is pretty much my only friend anymore. We dated back in middle school because he’s gay and I still thought I was a boy. And I do like men. So we dated until we were in high school. Then I came out as transsexual, and he said he would still be with me, but it was clear that he just wanted me to be his boyfriend. So we broke up but somehow he didn’t fully leave.
I think about it for a second. I don’t have any money for coke or cigarettes. “Fine,” I say.
I pull out my phone and start texting Mark, “com2urdad2nite.”
“OK,” he responds.
Jim starts grinning like he’s just secured a bank loan and I go to the bathroom to smoke another cigarette. I’m halfway through when I hear Georgina coming in. She blows something nasty out of her ass and I just sit there and finish my smoke before I toss the butt out the window. I go to wash my hands and Georgina comes out of the stall. She rushes to wash her hands next to me and get done. Then she leaves the bathroom. I finish washing my hands and go back to my chair.
There’s only 30 minutes left in my shift. Jim left already. He rarely stays more than an hour or two in the day. He’s really not a very good boss, but I’m just glad I don’t really have to do much work here. I see some light shining down. The clouds aren’t gone and they haven’t broken but the rain is light and they’re thinner. Bridgette showed up for her shift, which tonight is the night shift. I’m working nights for the rest of the week. I was just frothing for 4 p.m to hit so I could buck myself out the back door and hear my car make noises.
“Hola Louisssssssa, como estas?”
“Hooooollaaaaaaa,” I respond to her.
“How’s your going, Barbie?” I love the way she talks to me.
“It’s going, ugh, Jim’s got me coming to his place later, but at least Mark’s gonna be there.”
“You and Mark, you always talk about him. Jim is such a creep.”
I chuckle, “yeah, I don’t accept drinks at his place.”

“He gives you alcohol?” Bridgette said, covering her mouth.
“He would if I’d take it. When I’m at Jim’s I’m pretty clean and sober. Unless Mark’s there. He wouldn’t let something bad happen to me.”
“Huh. Good thing Mark’s there.”
“How’s the hubby?”
“Louise, I have not even talked to him in person, you cannot be calling him my husband.”
“But you’re in love with him.”
“I do not know that I am in love with him. In fact, today, he said something to his friend that I thought was kinda mean.”
“What? Oh my god, finally some good jock drama. What did he say?”
“Ok, so they were sitting at lunch all together, right, and his friend is being, like, kinda stupid and annoying, and Jacky just boxes his ears!”
“Jeez, just smacked him out of nowhere?”
“Yeah he didn’t even say that he was mad or anything he just hit him. And like, what if that’s how he is, what if he hit me?”
I have an image in my head of a jock boxing my ears. I think it would be hot.
“It’s just kinda freaky, you know?”
“Yeah.” I don’t know what’s wrong with me.
I gesture to Bridgette to come outside, the rain is light, and out the back door I light a cigarette.
“What are your plans after highschool?” I ask her.
“I don’t know, I might move.”
“Where?”
“Somewhere for college.”
I drag my cigarette. “Yeah.” I think about Bridgette like a bee pollinates.
“You know, why didn’t you ever go to college Louise?”
I drag my cigarette over and over again, deeper and deeper. “I just don’t think I would get in. And then I’d have to do the dorms and all that, it would be such a hassle.”
“Did you even try?”
“No,” I say, “but it doesn’t matter.”
“If you went what would you study?”
“Nothing. I wouldn’t go.”
“You’re really stuck on this, huh?”
I toss my cigarette on the ground. “I’ve already given it some thought,” I say. “I’m gonna go clock out.”

I hit the clock at 3:58, grab my shit, and leave. I say goodbye to Bridgette. Georgina is in her car when I get to the parking lot. The next manager is always late. Georgina waits in her car for him to get here. He's called Andrew, he's alright.

I put down my parking brake and put the car in reverse and I'm backing straight up into the dumpster. I stop just short, throw the car in gear, and floor it. I'm finally free.

Trumbel Boulevard is a pretty nice street to drive down this time of day. I like seeing the people as they walk down the road. There's a man stumbling around asking what day it is, and another tells him it's 20 years ago. You love to see the community spirit. I pull into the Double Cock drive through and order a 4 piece thighs and wings with a coke. At the window the worker sees my uniform and asks, "you just get off shift and come here? The food at Popeman's really that bad?"

I take my change, "yep," and he hands me my food. I drive off. I sip my coke and turn on the radio. They're playing some track about how we found each other on the dance floor, but tonight we are so bored, so we're gonna dance forever. It's insufferable. I love it. I go to the park.

I like eating chicken on grass. Even when it's been pouring all day. The grass is soaked and my ass is wet and I'm getting drizzled on more and more and the chicken is absolutely delicious. I think it's something to do with the air when it rains, how it drives off all the foul smells of the city and the grass allows you to breathe. I eat my 4 piece. I'm soaked.

I soak the interior of my car. Then I soak my floor mat, my living room, and my bathroom before I get the clothes off. Chanta isn't in the house. I brush and dry my hair and wash off any makeup that didn't come off from the rain. I look like a handmade doll for a sick Russian child with asthma.

I can't believe I even agreed to hang out with Jim. That means that now instead of laying down and girlsploding like I was hoping for I have to get ready and stay up late with that shithead. At least I'm doing the nightshift tomorrow night.

I put on a cd by some freaky post punk group out of Detroit and started looking at outfits. Jim likes girls who show skin, alt girls, high school girls, and transsexual girls. I needed to make sure that I didn't look like any of those things. It hit me: Lumberjack Butch, so I got it all together. Red flannel, green cargo pants, black t-shirt, red and white striped beanie, and black stomping boots. Still cranking dyke skulls and avoiding that godforsaken male gaze. I look in the mirror and I feel disgusting.

I get in my car and go to Jim's. He lives on the other side of town. On the way I stop for cigarettes and a new lighter. When I smoke Virginia Slims I feel like the girl in the ad. Or like I'm a showgirl from Sweet Charity. Hey big spender.

I pull up to Jim's and Mark's car is sitting in the driveway. I park on the street. It's starting to rain again. I open my new pack of cigarettes, flip one around for luck, and pick a different one to smoke. The smell of rain and smoke clears my sinuses and I walk up to the door. Jim is sitting by the window waiting for me like we're on a date.

Mark has his hat on backwards and he looks like a brutish frat boy. He's learned to blend in I guess. He's still in the closet to his friends, I heard. He'll be going back to college next week. He took a health sabbatical, he told the accessibility commission, to breath the fresh air for a little longer and clear his bronchitis. Mark was born with bronchitis, that's what he tells people at least. He never coughed when we dated.

"Hey Louise," Mark says to me, "how's your going?"

"I'm tired from sitting all day. I need a seat."

Jim takes off laughing like he's never heard a joke in his life. He's got coke on the table but when I look in his eyes I can tell that he's doing it to try and get me to fuck him. He does this a lot.

"Nice," Mark says, "How's your headache?"

"Not too bad right now," I say. I dip a finger into a little pile of coke sitting out on a mirror and rub it on my gums.

"Hey, hey hey hey, not too polite there," Mark says.

"Let her have some, Markey, HAHAHAHAHA," Jim's voice sounds hoarse and he keeps patting my arm. I pull away from him.

I sit down on their couch. I sink into it.

"3 more days," Mark says, "and then-" he smacks his hands together and flings one at the ceiling, "-I'm off."

"Wow, big man over here. Learning and shit."

"That's right," he tells me, "you're looking at the future #1 Project Imbecile impersonator in the whole of Five Straights."

"The best there ever was," I say. My cigarette is a little wet and it's flickering.

"Me and my guitar, we're going places. So soon as we get some education, isn't that right baby?" he pets his guitar like it's his cat, it's sitting on a stand next to him.

Sometimes I find Mark insufferable.

I turn on MTV. Beavis and Butthead reruns. Perfect. There's an ad for tooth whitener and the girl in the ad is exactly what I wish I looked like, from the eyes to the hair to the makeup and everything. There's nothing wrong with her face at all. She's slim and her jeans hang just right and she has a boyfriend who's tall and handsome and hot and I just feel so fucking jealous it's insane. Maybe it's the coke talking but right now there's nothing more I want to do but kill god and make him fucking pay for putting me in this goddamn body. I would pop out one of his eyes and chew on it and spit it out on his fucking beard and grab him by the dick and rip it off and stuff it down his throat. I would sear the skin off his legs with hot irons and flay the layers off of his ass like a christmas roast. That fucker deserves it.

Beavis and Butthead are getting in trouble at school and doing drugs about it. I should follow suit.

Mark's got some pot and he's rolling joints. I don't like pot very much but I need something to keep me from going fucking postal on the whole county. He lights a joint and I hit it and get a mouthful of weed because he doesn't even put like a cigarette filter in there he just rolls it and he says it's "authentic" but I say it's bullshit. I manage to get some smoke and I cough it out right away. It's so fucking rough and it tastes so fucking different from tobacco. I don't know how Mark just goes around smoking these like he's Snoop Dogg or something. I smoke some more of it and kind of hold on to it for a minute because I really need to calm down and I already promised myself I wasn't gonna drink here because I do not trust Jim for shit. So I puff the joint a few more times and keep spitting weed on the floor until it feels like something is happening and then I give it over to Jim and he starts doing the same thing. I sit back on the couch.

Jim does a line and stands up. He's snorting wildly and rubbing his nose. He says to Mark, "damn son, you get some good shit don't you."

"I guess so, dad," Mark says, laughing under his breath.

Jim's attention turns to me quickly, sporadically, he's locked in and he's coming over here. "How's your going, Lou?"

"Don't call me that," I say, chuckling to save embarrassment.

"Louise," he says, correcting himself, "how is your going?"

"I'm fine, I'm just sitting here."

He sits next to me and starts watching the TV. They're playing a new music video from this pop rock group out of New York. He's really into it. He's laughing when he hears this one guitar line, and it happens over and over again throughout the song. This one high pitched, "HA," and then he's just locked in again. When the song's over his head whips around to me so fast I thought he broke his own neck. "That song was amazing, wasn't it?"

"Haha, yeah man it was pretty good."

Usually in situations like this Mark saves me, he makes up some excuse for why just me and him need to leave really quick, but he's just sitting there rolling his joints. I don't know how he gets all these drugs.

"That guitar was insane. Mark, can you play like that?"

"Like what," Mark replies.

"Didn't you hear it? In that song? It was insane."

"Tsk, yeah I can do that."

Mark gets his guitar. Turns out that riff was just 3 positions played on the A and D strings over and over again.

"They probably didn't even have him play it more than once for the record. I bet they're some plant. The music video was dumb too, just them on some beach."

“Dude, I don’t know what you just heard but that was amazing,” Jim says, his brow bushing up and his lips getting tight, “that was probably one of the best songs I’ve ever heard and you’re just shitting on it because what? You figured out the guitar riff? You think you’re such hot shit.”

Mark raises his eyebrows. He finishes rolling the joint in his hand, grabs up the whole stack of about 5 or 6 and says, “Louise, let’s bail.”

I stand up immediately and start heading for the door. Jim’s being a dick again and I don’t want anything to do with it. And then in the morning it’ll all be, “I’m so sorry,” and “let’s hang out again soon,” in my voicemail.

“What?” he says, standing up so hard that he pushes the couch back a little bit, “you’re leaving? She just got here!”

I don’t like the way he’s yelling at all. It’s freaking me out.

“Louise is gonna help me do a little something.”

“And so what? I can’t come?”

“You are such a freak when you’re on coke dad. I would cut you off but I can’t imagine how shit you’d be on withdrawal,” Mark grabs his jacket and starts putting it on. “Now we’ll be back in a couple hours.”

“What the hell is so important that you gotta leave?”

“What the hell is so important about you? I’m the one who pays the bills, dope head, unless you fucking forgot. Oh, sorry, forgot about the little 200 a week allowance you get from that shit stain chicken finger factory.”

Jim’s face is getting all red like he’s gonna shit his pants, “fine then, just leave.”

Mark opens the door and I go through. We get in his car. The rain is clearing up a bit. I breathe a sigh of relief when I sit down. “Your dad is fucking crazy, man,” I say.

“I’m sorry he was being a freak again. I’m excited to not be here anymore. I hate coming home.”

“Yeah, I wish I lived out there in Bismuth. Junestadt is so boring.”

“It’s nice. The people always shuffling past, there’s all these places to eat and see and things to do. The punk scene is gnarly out there. I can’t wait to get back.”

“That’s cool.”

“Yeah.”

Mark turns on the car.

“So what are we gonna do?”

“Well, I’ve got something I’ve gotta do actually.”

“Oh, so do you want me to leave?”

“No, uh, I was thinking that you would maybe come help out.”

“Oh, yeah I’ll help out, what do you need me to do?”

“I just need another body to come hang in the background while I make a deal.”
Mark starts messing around with a backpack in the back seat.
“Like a drug deal?”
“Yeah.”
“Are you buying the drugs or selling them?”
Mark comes back to the front of the car. “Selling them. Sell off what I have left from the summer. Then I’ll get some more back in Bismuth. It’s cheaper there.”
“Ok, but you don’t usually have someone else at meets right?”
“No but, this is like a good deal of cocaine we’re talking about.”
“Like how much?”
“Like, about 6 keys.”
“6 kilograms of coke? In your back seat?” I look back there and the bag is wide open with those bricks of white sticking out, and there’s another one right next to it, full up just the same. “Holy shit! I’ve never seen that much.”
“It’s not for you.”
“I didn’t say it was for me, shit man, how much money is this worth?”
“Well I’m not getting the best price because I’m trying to get rid of it quick so this is all gonna go for about 60,000.”
“60,000? You’re gonna get me fucking killed.”
“Look, look, Louise, I’m not gonna get you killed, ok, you can trust me. You’re just gonna put on this hoodie, put the hood up, and stand there all tall and dark and menacing in the background, just this one time. And look, here.”
He opens up his glove box and pulls out a handgun. It’s some kind of .45, I don’t know too much about guns.
“I don’t know how to shoot that.”
“Sure you do, it’s just like when we used to shoot pellets at cans in my backyard.”
“Fuck no it’s not, that thing looks like it’ll break my wrist.”
“Look, just hold it with two hands, aim it, and pull the trigger. But you won’t even have to use it, because the deal is gonna go fine.”
“Mark, I don’t-” I close my eyes and take a deep breath, “why the fuck would I do this for you?”
“Louise, I-”
“No, tell me, what makes you think that I’m some gun toting drug dealer or some bodyguard or whatever the fuck you want me to be.”
“Louise, it’s gonna go fine. And I’ll pay you! I’ll give you 10,000, how about that? What does it usually take you to make that? ¾ of the year?”

My heart sinks and I imagine what 10,000 cash could do for me. I could go to a real doctor and get my headaches fixed. I could pay my back rent. I could find a job I actually wanted to do. I could move to Bismuth and start going to school in the spring. Then my pupils dilate, and I look at the gun, and I think to myself that it's worth it. And so I say, "Alright Mark, I'll be your shooter."

Mark pumps his fist like he just scored a touchdown. He's such a geek. I used to find that very attractive about him. I kinda still do. I wish he didn't like men.

Mark pulls off and I light a cigarette. The radio is on and the radio man is talking about a girl out in Ohio who cut the layers of fat off her stomach bit by bit in her bathtub. They say she had a copy of covergirl out and she had marked all the parts on the magazine that she wanted to look like. They say she was 16 and she was found dead 6 hours after she died, bled out with her hand still gripping the blade. Mark says, "what a bummer," and turns the station to rock.

It's maybe 9:30 or 10:00 when we pull up, a strip mall parking lot, underneath a flood light. Mark parks his car just out of the light, I had all the clothes on that he wanted me to wear, and I've got the gun gripped tightly in the big middle pocket on this hoodie. I'm standing around the back of the car, and Mark is leaning against the car looking out into the light. Another car pulls in, it has 3 people in it from what I can see. They pull up similarly. When the door opens I see there are really 5 people in the car. Someone gets out of the back and starts walking over. Mark steps out into the light. When the door on the car shuts, the lights inside turn off, and the people in it are as good as invisible.

"Is it here?"

"Yes sir, in all it's glory."

Mark pulls a bag from under the car. He opens it and shows the product inside.

The man pulls a knife seemingly from nowhere and pokes into one of the bags. He sniffs a small amount and rubs the rest into his gums.

"Ok," the man says. He walks back to the car and knocks on the hood. The trunk of the car pops open. The man walks over and takes out a large handbag, hands it over to Mark, and Mark counts the bill stacks and checks to see they're all 100's. The man picks up both backpacks while Mark inspects the money, and Mark says, "all here." The man then puts the two backpacks back in the car. He walks next to the car and says, "pleasure," before opening the door. When the lights in the car come back on, I see the 4 men in there are pointing guns at us: two of them with rifles, one with a compact submachine gun, and the driver with a regular revolver. The man gets in the car, closes the door, and they leave. The whole interaction probably only took 2 minutes, but it felt to me like an eternity, and the gun I held was soaked in sweat.

Mark walks back to the car. "See, I told you." I could see him shaking too.

"Yeah, easy money."

I sit in the car and Mark gives me 10,000. I hold the money in my hand and nothing in my life feels real anymore. Not the job, not Georgina, not Jim, not this town, not those bastard parents who threw me out for being a tranny. Nothing matters anymore because in my hand I hold the power to live a good life. To be happy. Finally. I'm surprised by how light it feels. For some reason I expect it to be 1s.

Mark snorts a bit of cocaine out of his hand. His head shakes back and forth violently for a moment and then he's seemingly normal. He hands me his bag and I get a bit under my fingernail and snort at it. All the adrenaline made it hit hard and fast and I felt like I was dancing in the front seat, I could swear there was a song playing. A minute later the music goes away and now I'm just sitting in a car that stinks like weed and I've got 10,000 weighing me down. "You want a burger?" he asks me.

Mark takes me to this drive through and tells me to order off the dollar menu. I get 2 cheeseburgers, fries, and a coke. I feel my blood pumping in my wrist. I don't hear what Mark gets. They give us the drinks first at the window and I start drinking mine down. Mark is pulling another joint out of his ass by the time the 15 year old kid is handing over the burgers. He takes the bag and says thank you and all of a sudden I'm sitting there telling him about how life is supposed to be like cartoons I watched when I was a kid, that people are supposed to be kind and help each other and make each other feel good. Then I start talking about how burgers always give me so much to look forward to because I love them and they make me feel like life is worth living. Mark is generally not terribly interested but he's nodding and eating and I realize that we're parked there in the parking lot of O'Donnel's and I should catch up because he's eating twice the burgers I am and I haven't eaten today.

I'm eating the burger and I'm obsessing about the calories. I can't help it. I'm sitting there thinking about how meat is one of the biggest sources of fat and calories and how I'm voluntarily sitting here sucking down french fries and coke and burgers and I'm looking down at myself and all I can see is a crossdresser and I have to just sit here and act like I'm ok because what am I supposed to do, not eat the food he bought me? Also I don't want Mark to worry about me. He acts like I'm dying sometimes. And I'm not dying, just because I get headaches, just because I don't like to eat. I love food. I wish I could eat it. I'm terrified of it. I can't keep eating this. I spit out a bit of it and I drink some of the coke and I ask to be taken back so I can get my car and go home. I start thinking about how I've already eaten today, actually, I just forgot, and how I should just not eat until tomorrow and let the coke do what the coke does and make me skinny and I don't realize that Mark has been talking to me until he's snapping in my face like he's resuscitating me. "Louise, are you ok? Is it bad or something?"

"I'm fine, Mark, I'm ok, I'm just shaken up and I'm tired and I want to go to sleep and sleep for a long time. I'm sorry I can't stay out longer." My eyes are glazing over a bit and I feel like a dog with 3 broken ribs cowering in the corner of its kennel.

'Are you sure? I was having a pretty good time."

"Yeah, I'm sure, can we go?"

Mark looks at me like a dad who's sick of looking at you and just wants you to shut up at the Red Lobster. He stuffs a handful of fries in his mouth and puts his car in gear.
The ride to Jim's is silent. Mark is listening to some bullshit on the radio, some kind of dance music. I light a cigarette. Mark lights one of his. Marlboro blacks. I looked out at the stores and signs and everything glowing out in the ether, there was a group of people hanging around a street light gambling, a few bars with way too many people for a Tuesday night. We got there and I got in my car and drove off without talking to Jim. I could see him in front of the door when Mark opened it to go inside, he had his mouth gaping and his arms thrown back like he caught a fish this big.
Chanta is in her room asleep when I come in. I go to mine and lay down and I'm just staring at that ceiling and I have the money in my hand and I'm thinking about the guns they pointed at me and that's when I feel in my pocket and there's still a gun there. Bully. I'm now a proud gun toting patriot. I put the safety on and put the gun in my nightstand. Despite Mark's insistence, I really don't know how to use a pistol. I can shoot a BB gun, or a varmint rifle, but I never learned pistols in the scouts. I've been thinking about getting one though. I want to carry it in my purse. But I don't think I have a purse big enough for it. Actually, now that I'm really looking at it, this gun is fucking huge. I always thought if I got a handgun it would be some little snub nose .38 special with a pink wash and an ivory grip.
Right as I'm trying to fall asleep, my head starts throbbing, my brain worm starts moving around my eye again. It's hungry, it's been getting larger, it's been eating away more and more at the sweet fatty flesh and blood. I get out of bed and throw up. My head hurts even more. I throw up again to get the last of the burgers out and start chugging water. Then I go to my room and sit by the bed. Me and Chanta do lights out at 10:00 to save power, so I just turn on the radio. The clock reads 11:49. I got home before midnight. They're playing this noise track from an Aussie punk group and it's just shrieking. I turn it down so it doesn't wake up Chanta, then I go to sleep.

Part 2: Storm

I wake up and it's already afternoon. I'm still tired and my head is throbbing. The brain worm has inched his way into the core of my eye and is taking over my vision. I want a cup of coffee.
I go into the driveway to get in my car to get coffee and my tire has been slashed again. It's gotta be that nasty fucker next door. I swear to god I'm gonna blow his goddamn brains out if I ever get my hands on a gun.
There is a gun in my house. There is a gun in my house. I am the proud owner of a gun. I wonder how long it would take them to find his body. I start walking past his house and he's out there watering his yard like he always seems to be. I stare at him but he pretends he isn't there. He's got the look of a guilty toddler. If I wasn't a pussy I would get my gun, come back, and blow his brains out. Splatter him

on the pavement and make a show of what happens when you fuck with me. I am a pussy, though. I walk to the corner store.

Evie is behind the counter and I have to remind myself not to say anything weird. I'm pretty sure she hates me. I wave at her when I go in. The coffee is in the back, there's some guy back there with a hoodie on and his eyes are bloodshot and he's glancing at me and then pulling back all hard and muttering something under his breath. I go to the coffee pot and pour myself a cup with milk and sugar and all that and I can feel him staring at me and I'm hearing him mutter and I wish that I were a star so I could implode. I hear a thunder crack outside and now it's pouring. I didn't bring my umbrella. I go to Evie to pay.

"I guess it's raining now," I say.

"Yeah," she says, "I guess so. 1.49."

She hates me for sure.

I give her 2 and she gives me back 0.51. I take the change to the payphone and call Mark.

"Hey, this is Mark's place, I'm not here right now, I might be out at college. Also Jim lives here. Leave a message!"

"Hey Mark, that prick next door slashed my tire again and I could really use a ride to Popeman's so I was wondering if you could pick me up at the corner store on Poplar and Northbound. If you get this later then-"

"Hey, what's up Louise?"

A beeping starts that means I have 5 seconds left.

"Oh hey Mark. Listen, I got caught up in the rain and that bastard slashed my tire, can you pick me up at the corner store on Poplar and Northbound?"

"Yeah I can pick you up."

"OKTHANKSBYE."

The machine cut me off at some point and started giving instructions to pay more. I drink some of my coffee. My headache is getting worse. That guy at the back of the store is just staring at me now.

I sip my coffee and stand around and act like I'm not incredibly uncomfortable. I wish people would just leave me alone when I'm in public. I'm always either a creep or a sex object. I can't tell which thing this guy is thinking.

The coffee starts tasting sour. I drink it faster. He's still looking at me and he's muttering louder now and rocking around. I could swear that he was born with red eyes, or he's some kind of vampire. I wish I was a vampire.

Mark pulls up in that same old Civic with the spoiler and all, he had a modified engine put in it, he said so he could outrun cops. Sometimes I worry that Mark thinks this whole drug business is like a video game, I wonder how many lives he has left.

I get in his car in the pouring rain, I'm practically drenched by the time I sit down. He looks at me with his hat on backwards, he's playing some duderock that sounds like knock off Sublime and he's skirting the pavement like he's trying to scrape dogshit off the fender. "It's raining fucking hard isn't it?" he says. I don't answer, there's no way he expects me to.
"I need you to kill me before this shift Mark."
"Shut up Louise, you know I hate when you talk like that."
"I'm serious, because otherwise I'm gonna do it myself in Popeman's and they're gonna have to shut down so they can scrape my brains off the wall."
"Ok, fine, you can have some coke. On me."
"It's not gonna make up for it."
"Come on, I know you're out, I know you've been too scared to ask, and I know you can't afford it. Just take it."
I wonder how good it would feel to just have a good amount of shit to get me through a couple months. Mark holds out this sandwich bag with so much cocaine I feel like I've never seen it all in one place, before I remember last night. Hell, I wonder how well Mark remembers it. I wonder if he knows I have a gun. I want to go get my gun. "Fine," I say, taking the coke.
Shit. 10,000. I have 10,000 sitting in my apartment too. How do you forget about 10,000? What am I doing? I'm going to some shift? At Popeman's? I should be on the road, going someplace real. I should be going to the city, or to Bismuth, or somewhere. I should be fleeing my shit situation and getting out into reality.
"I just don't think they should be doing all this shit to our water supply, you know?" Mark asks me.
"Huh?"
"They're diverting our supply so now it comes from the river instead of the aquifer. They want the aquifer to be used for agriculture. It's not clean water in that river, and they're gonna have people drinking it and bathing in it and everything."
"Gross, whose idea was that?"
"Jim Teller, he's got some god complex and made a deal with the farms. I bet he's getting some kind of paycheck."
The music keeps skipping on one track, like there's a deep gash in the CD. It makes it sound like the singer iss moaning in pain, like a horror movie torture scene. I wonder what it would feel like to be stabbed by a killer. I take some of the cocaine out with my fingernail and snort it. For a moment things are so clear, like every object has this dark outline. Then things just seem to become normal all at once. It's like I never took it. So I take some more. Now, the clarity sticks around a bit more, and I can hear the horror in the man's voice as he screams on the track, over and over he wails the same wail, Sisyphus attempting to call into the void, the sound waves echoing and returning in the same pattern as

the rock which rolls down the hill. I see the people and the children and the mothers and fathers and the bums and the Jesus freaks and we're at Mark's friend's place where he crashes when he's in town. Mark's friend is real personable, he always wants to talk to me, but all I want to do is look at his art books. He has this shelf where he keeps books on skater and surfer art from the 70s all the way through the 90s, and it's amazing seeing all the shit that they got up to. He tries to say something to me as I come in but I'm already beelining to that bookshelf and looking at those pictures. I take a bit more coke too, it helps me see all the little details. I'm clenching my teeth so hard I'm scared one is gonna pop out.

Mark's friend is talking about the picture I'm looking at and I don't care what he has to say. There's a big skull coming out of the woods, and it's got a body made of green fire, and huge tits underneath some armor plates. Something about it makes me see myself.

I spend what feels like 20 minutes looking at the picture, but it's 4 now and it's time for me to go to work. I ask to go to my house first.

When we pull up Chanta is in the kitchen, I can see through the blinds. I get in the house and go straight to my room. I've got it all figured out. I'm gonna take my gun and my money and some clothes with me to work. I'm gonna quit while I'm there, and I'll get my car repaired and go to Bismuth and start a new life there. I figure I'll just tell Chanta another time, probably tomorrow or whenever I leave. I can probably live with Mark, but if not I can stay in the car or in a motel even with the money I have. So I take about 200 out to pay for the tire (I buy expensive tires, it's one of the reasons I hate that fucker next door so much), and I noodle around for a purse big enough to hold that gun. I find one that's ugly but will get the job done and throw the gun in there next to my wallet and keys. Then I leave my room.

Chanta is standing there, self righteous as ever. "That is such an ugly purse."

"I didn't ask, Chanta."

"I'm just trying to be helpful, I mean, you are like, a tranny, right?"

"I know fashion, I just need this purse."

"Why? You got a gun in there or something?"

"No, I just need to carry some more shit. It's none of your business."

"It's my business if you're gonna be coming in here fucking things up and making people think I'm like poor or something. Also, where the fuck is your half of the rent? I've been paying the fucking rent for like two months while you sit around with yet another fucking 'headache'."

"How much is it?" I ask.

"You owe me like 1000."

"Look, I'll give it to you tonight, just let me get to work."

I don't even know why I'm going to work. One last shift I guess. That 10000 is getting heavy in my purse and I really need to get away from this bitch.

"I'll see you later," I say.

"If you don't got that money, then don't come back."

"Fine," I say. Maybe I won't come back. Keep my money.

I get out of my place. My chest is flaring and I cough. I jump a little bit as I walk. The sky is starting to gray over again. I sit down next to Mark, I look in the purse and I throw my clothes in there for work. Nice, I don't even remember doing that.

"How's Chanta?" he asks.

I sneer at him. I take out my bag of coke and I get a little silver bump spoon I keep on my key ring and dip it into the powder. I snort it and snort a bit more and block off one of my nostrils and snort again and my sinuses are still fucked.

"Mark what the fuck do you cut the yay with?"

"I don't cut it!"

My brain worm has consumed the entire left half of my brain and is currently trying to drill out of my nose to claim its next victim. My sinuses are doing all they can but eventually that thing's gonna break through.

"I swear, whatever you cut that shit with, you gotta do something else. I think it gives me fucking headaches man."

"Cocaine withdrawal gives everyone headaches."

"Do I look like I'm going through withdrawal?"

"You wanna give it back then?" he starts reaching for my bag.

I snatch it back. "I'm just saying man! Don't touch my shit."

"Fucking junkie," he says, then he pulls off. It's almost time for me to go to work.

Mark and I are sitting in the parking lot and I'm snorting more cocaine before I have to go in. While I snort this cocaine, I'm saying, "look, it's simple, ok? It's a muriatic acid bomb. So muriatic, that's hydrochloric too, they're the same right, so muriatic acid, you get that in a plastic bottle, and you put in a few balls of aluminum foil or some chlorine tablets, you pop the cap on, shake it three times, and chuck it. Acid bomb. Blows up anything within a few feet, makes a ton of noise. You could just have bottles with acid in them and toss in chlorine tablets and cap em, have 10 of them ready in a row. Flush people out of cover. Acid in their eyes. It would be useful."

Mark stares at me like I'm the biggest freak in the circus, the one with 4 foot hair growing off her nipples. "Don't go martyring yourself, Lou, it wouldn't be a good look for you to go down from one of your own chemical weapons."

“I’ve done it before, Marky-Mark, I’ve just not been so vocal about it.”

“You’ve been very vocal about it. You’ve told me about it like 6 times now.”

“Well did I tell you I set off the fire alarm at Jones Garret Middle School 3 years ago with a few of them?”

“Yeah.”

I snort a bit more cocaine. “I’d better get in there.”

“You good to go in?”

“Yeah, I should be good. Do you wanna hang out later?”

“Yeah, ok.”

I open the door to the car. “Cool, can you pick me up tonight at like 11:30?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Thanks. See you Mark.”

“See you Lou.”

I start shutting the door, “Lou, unclench your jaw.”

My teeth are trying to kill each other, they’ve each decided that their gang is the only one that deserves to stick around and they aim to take out the other one through sheer willpower. Their attack plan is simple: ram yourself against the enemy as hard as you can, and hope you are harder or less hollow or whatever factor decides which tooth shatters and which one stands. I call a ceasefire.

“Thanks, Mark.” I shut the car door and walk to the back door of Popeman’s. The dumpster stinks like there’s 400 dead rats sitting in every inch of the bastard, condensed down and waiting for the next of the continuous rainstorms to rehydrate it and allow it’s scent to flow through. It’s likely, really, that this is the case. When I open the door I’m hit with the scent of putrid fry grease that I don’t think has ever once been changed or cleaned. I almost prefer the 400 dead rats.

Georgina is hanging by the door, near my locker. She always wants to harass me the second I get in the door.

“Where’s your uniform? If you need a loaner, I can only give you a male one.”

“I have my uniform, I’m not on the clock ‘til 4, it’s only 3:40.”

“Well get changed so that poor girl can get a break. You know you shouldn’t make a woman do so much work when you’re more capable.”

I want to spit in Georgina’s eye and take it out.

I get in the bathroom with my uniform and I light a cigarette. I take off my pants and my shirt and I look down at my tits and fuss about how they aren’t growing anymore and how I wanted them to get as big as my mom’s at least. I put on the uniform. I wish I was allowed to be as mean to Georgina as she is to me. I wish that for one day out of the year I could poke her in the eyes one time for every

10 bullshit backhanded transsexual hating bullshit asshole bullshit things she says to me. I put on my name tag and get out of the stall.

At the front Bridgette is sitting there and doing pretty much fuck all. The storm is about to hit so I tell her, “you should get going before you can’t.”

“That’s so ominous bestie, you’re so mysterious.”

“I know, it’s all the pain I go through.”

“Hey did I hear right about a snowfall coming through?”

“What, are you like texting Mark now?”

“Sometimes.”

“Have fun with that.”

“Can I get a bit?”

I roll my eyes, “fine, but only because you’re nice to me.”

Bridgette goes into my bag in my locker and gets a bit of coke out on her finger. She snorts it, grabs her bag, and waves to me before leaving.

4 comes around and the cook leaves. “But you haven’t been relieved yet,” Georgina says.

“Don’t care, see you in 2 days.”

He just leaves like that and I can’t even tell my boss to quit being an asshole to me.

So I’m sitting with my stupid fucking crosswords or sudoku or whatever the fuck and I hear Georgina call out to me from the back. She says, “Rog-, Louise, get back here.”

“Why?”

There’s no one in the lobby, no cars in the lot, no one wants to come here and nothing is happening.

“Get back here now.”

I get up and put down my crosswords. I walk to the back of the building and Georgina is standing at the lockers holding my bag of cocaine in her hand.

“So you are some dealer now, yeah? You know people die from this shit?”

“Give me back, that’s mine.”

“Stand back, freak, this is a felony. I’m calling the cops. You’re going to jail.”

“You can’t go through my fucking things like that.”

“I didn’t, you had it sitting right there on top, locker wide open. Anyone could see it. You idiot.”

“Give me that back you bitch, I swear to god.”

I can hear the rain pounding on the windows, the thunder is near constant in its rolling. Sisyphus wailing in struggle as the boulder grows larger.

Georgina starts strafing past me to get to the phone. I go to my locker and get my gun out of my purse.

Georgina is standing at the phone, mounted on the wall. She picks up the receiver, and I point the gun at her.

"You really are just a dumb man aren't you?"

"Give it back, put down the fucking phone."

"You stupid man, you are a pussy. You won't shoot me! You think because you sell coke now you're hard?"

"Put the phone down or I swear to god."

"I'm calling 911, and they're gonna come here and you're gonna go to prison and we'll see if they think you're a girl there. Sex perverts love prison. Find you a daddy."

"If you touch that dial, you're fucking dead."

Georgina laughs. Then she looks at me for a second. "You won't do it." She touches the dial. The brainworm is now in full control. Bang bang bang bang bang thud bang bang.

I blink a couple times, some of the coke spilled on the floor. Georgina is shot through the neck, chest, stomach, her right arm, and her right leg. She is looking at me when I grab the bag out of her hand and snort some of it. Her lips are moving but I can't hear what she's saying. The brain worm shrinks and goes away entirely. It's like I never even started having a headache. Georgina's eyes stop following me.

I look at Georgina's body for a minute. I stand a good distance back, like she's gonna wake up and jump at me. But she doesn't, she just lays there, she bleeds quietly and politely by the phone.

I wonder if she had kids.

I go and lock the front door, but there's no reason. No one is gonna come in. It's hailing now, big quarter sized pieces. They're thudding against the window, I feel like it might shatter. I lock the back door too, so if the new cook shows he can't get in either. I go to the bathroom and vomit. I killed her. She is dead. She is dead and I killed her and she is dead. I could've done so many other things. I could've not brought a big fucking sandwich bag of coke to work with me. It's all over I think. No more Bismuth, no more escape. Probably I'm done for, going to prison for a long time. I light a cigarette. My brain worm throbs like a grapefruit were surgically implanted behind my eye. I puff and puff and I can't stop seeing her.

I get halfway through the cigarette and throw it in the toilet. I go to the phone behind the register and call Mark at his house. I hope he's back at home, because he never seems to keep his phone charged. The phone rings for what feels like way too long because he doesn't have an answering machine and it just keeps ringing if you let it. Eventually I hear his frat boy persona bleeding through the line. "Hello, Mark here. Yet another cloudy day in Junestadt"

"It's Louise. I've got a fucking situation I need some help with."

"Jeez Lou, what'd'ya kill somebody?"

“Just get over here would you?”

“7 minutes.”

He hangs up on me. I start looking at Georgina’s body again. She’s lying there in a big ass pool of blood now. I’m imagining cleaning her up. Mopping the blood. Wrapping the body in a trash bag or two. Wiping things up and making it look as if it never happened. I’m thinking about how heavy she probably is. She was only like 5’3 or 5’4 so I imagine not very much. She didn’t show any weight anyway. I light another cigarette and I lean on the counter and I wait for a minute but while I’m looking around I see one of the security cameras. Jim is a lazy cheap bastard so I know the footage has a 0% chance of going to a police database if I destroy the tape. The camera room is also the store room. I go there. There’s a single TV that’s showing maybe ½ to ¾ static and next to it the actual tape that would be recording what was shown. I could see Georgina’s body right there in the camera. I took out the tape and I smashed it and took out the reel and stuffed it in my pocket so I could get rid of it later. I don’t know how smart these cops are.

I hate that I’m thinking so clearly after committing murder. I get to thinking about how this is not how normal people respond to having become a murderer, especially immediately after. Some part of my brain had seen enough crime dramas to know that I needed to focus on not getting caught. Getting caught means prison, and for me that would mean a male prison. Doesn’t matter that I’ve been recognized as a woman by the state, doesn’t matter that I’ve lived as a woman in public since I was 15. Male prison with male prisoners, many of which are straight and rapists and straight rapists. Or hate transsexual people and would make me miserable or kill me. Or I’d just die of neglect in the fucking substation. Who knows. Not an option. Break the tape, never dump it there, some CSI magic might happen and then they’ve got the footage just fine.

I thought about what a good story would be. Robbery? Maybe. Why wasn’t I shot? Why was the tape tampered with? I don’t know, I wasn’t there. Ok, but what about that coworker that saw you. She wouldn’t rat me out, surely not. No way. Over murder? She’d definitely rat me out over murder, that’s for sure. Plus I’m pretty sure she secretly hates me. Something to do with rats? Maybe? I’m scared of rats.

I go to my locker and take some cocaine. I deserve it. I’ve been through something and I deserve it. The snort goes straight to the back of my nose and it fucking burns and I snort like a horse for a minute and when I stop I look at Georgina and I hear a knock on the back door. My heart sinks. I feel like Frankenstein confronted with the mob. I go to the door and open it a crack and it’s Mark and he’s getting pelted hard with that golf ball size hail and I let him in.

“Fuckin me, next time I’m saying no Lou. Don’t call me in a hail storm again. Jesus. So what’s wrong, wahappen?”

I don't say anything, I just stand there and I look up at him and I stick my thumb out at the body like I'm asking for a ride to it.

"LOUISE. Louise is this a prank. You're fucking with me. I'm gonna be on TV right? What the fuck Lou?"

Mark marched over to the body and started looking at it closer. "You killed your manager. Shit, shit my gun! You have my gun don't you? Fuck I was looking everywhere for it."

"I thought you were giving it to me."

"God Louise, I give you everything don't I. Give you 10,000, give you fucking 5 or 6 or whatever the hell ounces of coke, *ounces* Louise, not grams. Give you everything. And now I'm helping you? Is that it?"

"I was hoping…"

"You were fucking hoping? Great. I was hoping to have a nice last couple nights in town here, go back for the semester. Looks like I don't get that do I?"

"I'm sorry."

Mark looks at his shoes. He stands in her blood. He steps back and looks at his footprint. "Yeah, you're sorry."

I light another cigarette. The radio is on and it's playing some shitty song about dancing the night away and pumping up the volume.

"Is there bleach here?"

"Yeah, a lot of it."

"Good. Get all the rags and the mop together. We've gotta make her disappear."

"Is that really gonna work?"

"It has to. Because I'm not gonna rat on you. And that makes me an accomplice now."

"But what do I tell them?"

"We're gonna go over that. Stage a robbery. Call the cops. All kinds of things. She was kidnapped. They'll search for her body, and they'll find it. Maybe. Some day. The bones."

"What about her family? What about her life? What about all those people? What about their closure?"

"Sorry, Lou, but really you should've thought of that before you shot her."

I put the cigarette in my mouth, put my hands on my temples, and pace around like a nervous child.

"Look, we can get out of this, but you need to think calm."

"I'm not supposed to be calm. And neither are you! Why the hell are you so calm about this?"

"I kinda expected it. Usually you tell me off when I accuse you of murder."

"Well, I didn't want to say it over the phone. Seemed like a bad idea."

“Probably. Look, get the rags, get the mop ready, we bleach after. She’s already pretty much bled so hopefully it won’t leak out of the garbage bag.”

I nod and cry a little and I go to the cleaning closet and I get out all of the cloths that I can find and I start piling them on the floor by the body. “Just lay them in the blood, we need to sop it all up. Get some gloves on and get a garbage bag too.”

I do what he says and start the slow meticulous process of sopping up 3-5 liters of blood from the linoleum. Then I throw the blood soaked rag into the trash bag. I keep doing this until I get to this point where I’m just smearing a little bit of sticky blood across the floor and I say to Mark, “I think I’m done,” and he looks and says, “Yeah, now time to mop,” so I get out the Fantastico and the mop bucket and I fill it with water and I add the Fantastico and I mix it all together with the mop and start mopping.

Mark stops me. “Now we gotta get the body out of here so we can get the last bits of blood scrubbed out.”

Mark ran out to his car, covering his head from the hail, and came back with a roll of these extra large trash bags. The kinds that they buy for those huge drum trash cans that janitors use for sports complexes and universities. The body was kinda propped like a snail, with its legs crumpled in toward the rest of the body, so he started by placing the bag under her legs and lifting the legs to slide the bag under them. Then I start helping by pulling the bag while he lifts individual areas of the body up to the head. Most of the blood that’s still in the body is pooled in the back, and when he lifts some areas of the torso more blood spills out of the wounds like a leaking jelly donut. We tie the bag shut and let out all the air and then we wrap another bag over it.

“What are we gonna do with it?”

“I know a nice spot. We’re gonna have a bonfire. A fast one hopefully.”

“Why do you keep those bags in your car?”

“Not my first time.”

He runs out and gets his car right up next to the building. I clean the rest of the blood on the floor. When he comes in his trunk is open and we start picking her up. She’s certainly not a light person. We load her in the trunk of the car and close it. Then Mark says, “Give me back that gun.”

“Let me keep it.”

He sighs at me. “One day you’ve had it and you’ve already killed someone.”

“Look, she caught me with that coke and she was gonna call the cops. I would’ve gone to prison. I had no option.”

Mark looks at me all screwed up like a dad who’s disappointed his daughter started shitting the bed again. “I need to take it. And the coke. And the money. You are an employee here. You called after 10 minutes, like the kidnappers said to. Do you need a script?”

“No, no I don’t need a script.”
“You’re gonna say they kidnapped her. They shot a few bullets and they’re taking her somewhere you don’t know. They were mad there wasn’t a safe to rob because this is such a dive so they took her. You think into sex slavery, but you’re not sure. They didn’t take you because they only want real women.”
“Right. I am a real woman.”
“You know what I mean. Born woman.”
I hate when he talks like this. “Whatever. Fine.” I hand over my gun and go to my locker and hand over the money and the coke and Mark takes it all in his jacket and hoodie pockets which he never seems to run out of and I look at the floor and I see the linoleum where the body once called “Georgina” laid and the only question I have is, “Do I get to see her burn?”
Mark screws his face up again. “Jesus, thought you were more innocent than that,” he picks up the trash bag full of blood soaked rags, “I can pick you up later. Get a ride home from the cops. Call me when you’re ready. I’ll get some beer.”
“Ok, cool.”
Mark walks out the back door and tosses the trash bag in the back seat and starts off onto the street. I see the clouds parting in the light pollution. The storm starts to let up. I start crying as hard as I can. I figure let it all out since I’ve gotta sell it to the cops anyway. Make that mascara run baby. I pick up the phone and dial for police and the operator picks up and I say, “operator, quickly, get to Popeman’s, my manager was just kidnapped.”
“Ok ma’am, it’s ok, calm down. Can I get your name?”
“Louise, I work here,” I choked back some tears, “I work here at Popeman’s. In the storm, these men, they came and they kidnapped her, and they took the security footage and they shot holes in the wall and they couldn’t get any money so they took my manager.”
“Ok, are they still there?”
“No, no, they said if I called when they were there they would kill her and come back and kill me too. They said to wait 10 minutes.”
“Ok ma’am, stay on the line, there are some officers en route now.”
I light a cigarette. “Ok, ok thank you. I’m so scared. Do you think they’ll come back?”
“I would stay vigilant ma’am, but the police are on the way. I have a car 2 minutes out, ok?”
“Ok, thank you.”
The cops finally let me go at about 11:20. I was hoping it would be earlier. Now the sky is dark. I think to myself, isn’t it such bullshit that I killed my manager and I don’t even get off my shift early. I mean, I got off like an hour and a half early. That doesn’t really count though. Cops really grill you when you claim your manager was kidnapped. They expected all these descriptions. Some of them called me ma’am and others called me sir. I look up at the sky and I can see just a couple extra bright stars

peaking through that lovely layer of light pollution, I can see the clouds reflecting back down onto me. I start walking home. It's a 14 block walk. I asked the cops for a ride and they said no. They didn't give a reason but I could tell it was because by the end they could all tell I'm transsexual.

The concrete is this nice shade of blue from the moon and I can see Georgina looking at me as the life drained out of her. Listening to me blaming her for killing her. She was a bitch. I have to remind myself. She made my life hell in every way she could. She took the same shifts as me every time so she could berate me. I'm gonna see her burn tonight.

I'm getting closer to my house. The street lights are such a nice color aren't they? I can see the corner store. It's still open. I don't have any money though, and they aren't allowed to sell hard liquor anymore, and there's no shot I'm gonna carry a case of beer when Mark is coming by with one later. I waved in the door at the cashier, it was Limmy, a little freak. He didn't look so he didn't see me.

I got home and Chanta was sitting in the living room with the lights on. When I open the door she has a copy of "Skeleton Crew" in her hand and she's pretending to read it. "Where's my money, Louise?"

I roll my eyes. "I have it, it's with Mark right now."

"Pack your things then."

I tisk loudly.

"I'm serious. Pack up. I've been paying the rent on my own for months. I can keep doing that. You don't have the money, so pack your things. That was the deal. This is my fucking apartment, I'm the one who pays for it."

"Look, I'll call Mark, he was gonna come over anyway, then I'll give you the money."

"No, I'm not gonna stay awake after you leave. I know you've got enough bags to fit your shit, I want you gone tonight. I'll sue your ass."

"Really? You're doing me like that? Booting me at, what, what time is it even? Oh my god, you're booting me at midnight? You know what kind of night I just had? My fucking manager was kidnapped in a robbery."

"Blah blah blah blah blah, holy shit bitch I do not get any money from you, I don't need to hear you fucking yap. Pack your shit. Call Mark to pick you up. Go suck him off for a couch to sleep on."

"Man, fuck you."

"Get out of my fucking apartment."

"Fine," I go to my room. In the back of my mind there's a song playing and it has a lot of trumpets and other brass instruments and muzak guitar. I pack up clothes and toiletries and shit that's expensive and my pictures and I call Mark's house and he's on the way to pick me up. So I go outside and flip off Chanta through the window and I see her turn her light off and I sit on the hood of my car with my bags and wait to see Mark's car come in.

Mark gets there and he has my coke and my money and he even gives me back my gun. “I guess you had a good reason,” he says.
I’m choking up a little. “I need to get a tow truck out here and get it to your place.” I sit down and close the door and hear that crunch.
“Handle it tomorrow.”
I take that as an invitation to go to sleep.

I wake up and the car is stopped and Mark is jostling me, and he’s saying, “Get the fuck up, hide the coke, we got fucking pulled over.”
I take a second and blink, “you got us pulled over? What the hell did you do?”
“I don’t know, it’s like 2 a.m, maybe he’s just pulling people over.”
Her body is in the trunk. “What if he searches the trunk?”
“Why would he search the trunk?”
“Why would he search me? How did you get us pulled over, you dumbass?”
“I don’t know,” he says, “I guess I was speeding maybe?”
There’s one of those pigs at the window. She’s got her knuckle out and she’s tapping on the glass. I rub my eyes and blink at her flashlight and Mark rolls down the window.
“Cana do ya’?” Mark asks.
“Why the hell were you going that fast?”
“I’m sorry, how fast was I going?”
“Goddamn too fast, that’s how fast you were going,” she looks over at me, “let me see your license.”
Mark hands over his license.
“Two minutes.”
She walks away from the window. “Is she gonna find anything, Mark?”
“I don’t see how, I don’t think I got a record.”
“You don’t think? Have you been arrested or not?”
“I don’t think so.”
“Yes or fucking no.”
“No.”
“OK. Fuck man. I’m goddamn tired, you get us pulled over out in the middle of… where the fuck are we?”
“Marcon. Just outside of it anyway.”
“Marcon, great.”
“Yeah, little quiet town, not a lot of people out at night.”

“Except for speed traps.”
“Yeah. I mean, why did I buy the upgrades if I wasn’t gonna use them?”
“Yeah, right,” I say.
It seems like every second is a mile and I’ve been running for hours. The pig is standing by the window of his car talking to his partner. He keeps glancing back at us. The rain is starting to trickle over the windshield. I wonder how much longer he’ll want to wait in the rain for an answer.
“Mark, what if they look in the car?”
“He’s not gonna look.”
“What if there’s, like, blood on the trunk or something.”
“He wouldn’t even see it, he’s like 60 or something.”
“He could see it, he could look at the trunk and see something and then we’re done.”
“No, then we would run.”
I see myself splashing against a boulder after ejecting from Mark’s windshield.
The cop comes to the window. He hands over a ticket. “Slow the hell down.”
“Will do, sir,” Mark says. Then he pulls off.
We drive for a while longer. I’m still pretty pissed off about the whole getting-us-pulled-over situation, and Mark is just sitting, listening to the radio. The radio man is talking about Georgina, saying about how she’s gone missing. Presumed dead, they’re saying. There’s a small search party out. They don’t know where to look. They’ll be questioning the people close to the scene before the end of the week. Say she might have just run away with them. Bonnie and Clyde.
We pull up to this valley, the kind that floods in the spring and dries up in the winter. It’s marshy and wet and full of bugs and it’s disgusting and stinks like shit. “Jesus, Mark, you said you knew a place.”
“I do,” he says, gesturing to the pile of wood on the other side of the valley. “See, we burn her and then we just push the bones in the valley. That’s why it’s so fertile here.”
“How many times have you done this?” I ask.
“I’m not gonna tell you,” he says, pressing my shoulder. Sometimes he slips up, acts how he used to, playful. Always at such weird times.
I can’t wait to get a drink. I wonder if ever someone has had a worse night than me. The trunk sits open, there’s Georgina, and the bitch’s shoes have poked a hole in the goddamn bag and there’s blood all over the upholstery. I lift up her shoes and the blood pours out from another hole her earrings tore in the bag up by her head. Mark’s got blood dripping down his arm as he tries to get the bag up out of the car, and the blood starts spilling out from the center in a big rush. Everything is soaked. We wrench the body out of the car and we lob it over to the bonfire. Mark uses a tub of lard with a bunch of sticks and cardboard to get it started and within seconds it is overwhelming the rain in heat and energy. The fire

just seems to burn and burn and burn and soon I can smell the burning plastic and hair and sinew and blood and meat and bone and brain and body that once was Georgina, my shitty boss at Popeman's.

And suddenly I couldn't care less about her family or the kind of person she was to others or the life she lived or the things she accomplished. Instead, I feel good. I feel a deep connectedness with this need I've had for so long. I feel my brain fog lifting and my head stops hurting. Like Georgina was quite literally a curse which I have washed away from this earth. For a moment I feel as though the world is now better off.

Mark's noodling in the trunk and the flames are just pouring and he's ripping out the upholstery in the trunk and throwing the pieces out. His arms are already covered in blood and the rain is picking up and it's soaked the blood into the rest of his clothes. The pieces are all getting piled up next to him in the tall grass, I glance over at the flames and I can see them licking up at the sky from the eye sockets in Georgina's skull. I pick up the pile of upholstery pieces and throw them on the flames. Mark is really fucking pulling, he's trying to get it off from around this bolt without taking the bolt out. I guess he doesn't want to get his wrench bloody or some shit. Maybe he doesn't have one. I let the rain wash some of the blood off of my face and arms and everywhere that it seemed to just go after chucking that corpse to the pyre. Mark seems finished and he turns around again to look at the flames. "OK, let's get the fuck out of here."

"Yeah."

I get in the car. Fucking soaked. Hate the rain for that. Mark is soaked too and he slaps his little hat back on his wet mop of a head when he sits down. "Don't ask me for help with this again. I'm not gonna be "your guy" so you can be a serial killer or whatever."

I look at him and I wanna spit in his face. "Fuck you."

"Yeah, whatever," he says, "just don't. You're staying at mine?"

Yeah, Mark's place. It's safe there. Cops won't ask us any questions. Hell, maybe I can even pay him a little rent and just live there. Or just talk to his landlord. Whichever works I guess.

Mark drives back down this washed out unmarked piece of shit dirt road out in the middle of nowhere and he's getting stuck at every mud pocket and I swear the lightning is getting closer and closer. I'm bouncing around from his little street suspended car. I wish he got into rally driving instead of street racing. We could be in a tricked out Forester with the biggest tires you can fit on the thing tearing ass through the backcountry right now and instead we're pussyfooting around like a dog with a piece of glass stuck in their paw. I keep my mouth shut about all this because he's giving me a place to stay and he did find the road which I would bet I wouldn't have been able to do.

We're going back to town. Thank god. The rain is those aggressive big blobs that splatter on your windshield and kinda freak you out every time they hit until they're the only thing hitting and there's half a million of them. Like a downstairs neighbor to a metal show. I'm so fucking glad I never

have to see Georgina again oh my god. I think I would kill a hundred people if it meant I got to feel like this. And yet I can settle for just this one.

He's playing this weird music where the girl has a somewhat nasally and raspy voice, like she has a distorter in the back of her throat. The song ends and the radio man comes on and he's talking about Georgina asking people to keep an eye out for a 5'7" white woman, last seen in corduroys and a Popeman's uniform, who appears to be in distress. Other than the uniform, her description probably matches about ⅗ of the women in this city. And besides, if she was kidnapped, they wouldn't keep her in town, would they? I think it'd be smarter to just book it and get out of town, you know, to a more secure place in the mountains or something. The music turned back on. I looked at the clock. 01:58. I blink and then it says 03:12. We're at Mark's place.

We get out of Mark's car and he's talking about how tired he is. He's got another bump sitting in his fist and he takes it and he shakes a little like he's getting chills down his spine. The rain seems to be right behind his house, the storm and the clouds and all the noise are sitting over it like they're waiting to come in.

"I'm gonna pass the fuck out."

I don't say anything. I'm actually gonna pass the fuck out. Like the second I get in here. I'm landing on the couch and that's it. Out.

I hit the couch and like I said. Out.

I wake up and I'm grinding against the couch. I had no dreams. I've got a pillow between my legs and I'm really close to cumming. I spit on my fingers and start rubbing the tip of my cock back and forth and I bite the cushions on the couch to muffle my moans. I squeeze one of my tits and it's sore and tender from sleeping in my bra and I think of Brittany and I imagine her licking it and I cum in my hand. Some of it goes on the couch. I eat it. It tastes bad. I swallow it and tuck my dick away. It doesn't get hard anymore. Thank god.

I blink awake and the room is not how I remember it being set up. He's got a lot of new art and shit up on the walls. I sit up and look over to the kitchen and it doesn't look like he's done a single dish all summer. He's moving out today too. And he's just gonna leave an entire house worth of dishes I guess. Maybe he's gonna hire a cleaning lady.

I wish I could have a place for myself like Mark. Maybe I should start dealing. I tried a little in highschool but people never trusted me nor my prices. They were right to. I was cutting it. Besides who wants to buy coke from a faggot.

I think about Jenine. She was the only out transsexual in highschool. She helped me get pills. We would take estrogen and make out under the furthest east staircase and we'd feel each other up and bite each other and cut each other and taste the blood. She made me feel desired. Like I was hot enough for her. I

remember when she got me my first Bikini Kill tape and we listened to it together in my car and she took out my tits and told me how big they were getting and how I'd better get measured for a bra. Then she started touching them and teasing them and playing with them and I was breathing so fast that my face and my hands and my feet went all tingly and I closed my eyes and covered my mouth and moaned. Then I sucked her off. I asked her why it didn't get hard and she told me it was because she was on testosterone blockers. But that was just because she had them prescribed. They're not really the kind of thing that you buy off some guy on the street. Jenine was beautiful. I should've appreciated her more.

I go to the kitchen. The only things in the entire kitchen that are clean are the coffee pot and 4 mugs. I really hope he doesn't bring guys here. They must be disgusted. I make coffee and drink it hot and black like cold water and it burns my throat but I'm so fucking tired. I go to my purse, sitting on the floor a couple feet away from the couch toward the front door. I put a good couple points in my fist and snuff it.

Mark is snoring like an old man with a blockage in his left sinus. He smokes too many cigarettes. My clothes are hanging off me like curtains and I feel like the window. Mark is the door.

There's a knock at the door. It isn't Mark. It's the front door. I go to look and there's a cop standing out there. I figure we aren't there. Or we're asleep. He knocks louder. Harder. He says, "Hello it's the police." I don't answer. I'm just looking at him like he's a snake in a cage, I can see his gun hanging off his belt and his little partner is standing behind him. I wonder what he wants. "There was a murder last night, or a kidnapping, someone saw your car. I need to take a statement."

Mark is still lying there snoring like he hears the cop and he wants him to know he's asleep.

I look at the cops and I wonder how unhappy their wives are. They both look like they haven't made a woman cum in their lives. They look like the guys I used to fuck in high school. They just want a warm hole to put it in. The short one in the back looks like a little kid with the fish eye glass in the sight hole. He's looking up at the other one like he's waiting for his mom to be done talking to her friend at the store. He's got a big dumb ranger hat on too, like he's in a horror movie or something. I'm giggling to myself and I have this picture of Georgina flash in my eyes and I stop. I go away from the door as quiet as I can and go to the kitchen to get myself something to drink. I see the lights in the window flash away and peel down the street as I pour milk in a glass and mix chocolate syrup into it. I stir it until it's good enough and then I start drinking it. The milk leaves a stain on my lip.

I go to take a shower and I drop one of the shampoo bottles I keep there off the shelf and it slams down on my toe and gives me this nasty throbbing pain and suddenly the brain worm is back and it's chewing on my left eye and making it hard to see. I finish the shower and the entire left half of my vision is gone to gray swirls and brain worms with red and orange stripes are crawling around in my eye. I'm trying to think of any good German swear words to shout but the only thing I can think of is "schwul" and I start

debating to myself if that is even really a swear word or if I'm just being homophobic. It's hard not to be when I have to spend my time with Mark. He really spoils the whole lot. I'm grateful and all but I gotta say he's a real bitch.

Mark is awake and out when I get out of the shower, and I keep blinking my left eye shut and then opening it like that's gonna do anything about my blindness.

"How'd you sleep?" I asked.

"Like shit. I always sleep like shit after a body fire."

"Yeah. You want any chocolate milk?"

"No, no get me a beer. I gotta get on the road soon."

"Do you think you can call me for my car? I need to get it repaired."

"Yeah, sure."

"Thanks."

I get Mark his beer.

"Where do you want the tow to?"

"I guess to the Brickheat. They can replace it there. Then I guess I'll get a cab home."

"Oh yeah, yeah, with all your money you got now huh?"

"Yeah, look at me. Free. No more shitty job. Shitty boss. All thanks to you Mark."

"Yeah, great."

Mark picks up the phone from the table and slides the phonebook out from the shelf. He finds a tow company and calls them and tells them my old address.

"Hey, can I stay at this place for a little bit."

"Uh, yeah I guess. The lease is out on the 27th so, in about 3 days. There's gonna be someone else moving in so you need a new place."

"OK."

"Yeah. Sounds good."

"Well, I'd better get back to that car for the truck."

"Yeah."

Mark gets his ass up out of bed and finishes his beer and gets his shit loaded up to go back to Bismuth. We get in the car and he takes me to my car and the tow truck is pulling around the corner when we get there. I tell him about the tires and the neighbor and he loads it up and that asshole is standing out there staring at me watering his plants. Mark is long gone, and I hear this dick saying, "finally, we can have some peace in this neighborhood without another tranny faggot walking around all the time, flaunting his shitty lifestyle choices."

I wanted to shoot him, just to save Junestadt the trouble of dealing with another asshole. Instead I load up in the cab and the driver takes me to Brickheat. He barely speaks any English, his phone is all in

German and he has a translator on the phone telling me what I need to pay for the tow. I give him 35 and he takes off and the guys help me push my car into their shop. They quote me 275 to replace all the tires and I take the deal because I figure I should get them all replaced and then get out of town. They say it'll be done by the end of the day and I walk over to the mall to get some coffee. There's a Minkfox and the barista looks cute. I wonder if there's anything in my hair. I keep seeing cops look at me and it makes me feel like I'm gonna get taken in.

I'm starting to think that maybe they are after me, because I can see one kinda tailing me and he keeps talking into his radio while he looks at me. I go up an escalator to see if he follows me and he does. I pick up the pace a bit and go into K.I Nikelsohn's to try and lose him. He follows me in and I try and keep my head down and get between some of the racks. I got a little bit of distance between the two of us and then another two cops are in the store. I make it to the other side where the store connects out to the parking lot and book it straight out onto Mitchel and start running toward the alleyway behind Brickheat. I perch up behind a dumpster and wait for a second but I start hearing all these sirens coming around. Come to think I'm probably wanted for questioning now. Then they book me and I'm gone for who knows how long. No, I need to get away, and quick.

I hop on the dumpster and climb a fence at the top of this little drop off into someone's backyard. There's a dog barking at me but no one is home, so I go in the house really quick and call Mark. I tell him that "the cops are on me and you needs to come and get me I was about to get my tires done and get out of town but they're swarming the area I need some transport meet me by the Double Cock a good ways down by Regression Avenue." I said it as fast as I could and I hung up. I go out the front door of the house and start running across Hepburn toward Julipp. I go in the alleyway there and run a good few blocks down that same alley until I came across a bike someone's left untied and unprotected. I take the bike and now I'm going maybe 6-8 mph then the rest of the way down and I crouch down behind someone's car that's sticking out in the alley while I wait for Mark. There's all these sirens getting in my head and I'm sure that they were coming fast. I see Mark pull up on the side of the road all fast like he's in a movie. I jump in the back and we're off. He's taking me down Mitchel and I see all these cop cars blowing past us the other way.

"Goddamn it, Lou, you really got me into some messed up shit. Goddamn it. You know what the radio man was saying. You and me are wanted. Shit. Hey, tell me something, last night, if I'd'a told you to turn yourself in, would you have done it? Because shit, I should'a."

"Look, I'm sorry I don't know what to do." I look back at my car. It's all gone. All of it. No clothes. No car. All I have is the coke and my money and my gun and Mark. And I need to get the fuck out of Junestadt. And never come back.

The radio is on and the radio man is speaking and the radio man says that they are no longer confident in the testimony that I gave, that the officers who released me were not supposed to, and that

they can't find me because I don't live at my last known address anymore. They're calling Mark my boyfriend and saying that he's helping me escape the city, that they're looking for any information on Georgina's disappearance or for my location, and that they'll give any non-anonymous tip a cash reward if the information they give leads to an arrest or conviction. Shiver me timbers.

We can't get on the freeway because they're starting to set up road blocks and spike strips in the road. Instead we're just riding right down Mitchel, since if you go far enough it turns into a highway. A historical highway, actually. One of the first in the country, and part of the first highway to ever split this region between the north and the south. The highway that made this city exist in the first place. The highway will save us.

I snort some cocaine and light a cigarette. I'm out 300 and for what? I'm really gonna miss that car. I wonder what Mark is yelling about.

"Come the fuck on Lou! I'm talking to you! You need to do more than fucking apologize for this shit. You have fucked up my life. I spent 3 years evading the law. Successfully. That was my 3rd fucking body, you know that? But you had to kill your boss at work. That's how you fucking get caught. You killed her right there in the middle of the city, and everyone knows that you fucking did it. I mean I wouldn't be surprised if my dad just straight ratted on you. He would do that, you know."

"I know, I know Mark, look, there's nothing I can do now."

Mark grips the steering wheel until his knuckles have gone completely white and he's vibrating harder than one of my toys. Then he lets go. "I know." He says.

We get out of town and there's all these trees and leaves are falling as we pass by and the breeze is catching just right for the aspens to rattle and they shimmer in the sunlight peeking through the clouds. For a moment I wonder about if there's a heaven and if Georgina would've gone to it. She was awful to me but maybe she was good enough to other people that it canceled out. I wonder if it would be me or her going to heaven if it couldn't be both or none of us. I for one think limbo sounds the most appealing. Something about a constant dream state of looking around and back on your life just seems to me like when I'm about to go to sleep but I haven't yet. It sounds nice.

Mark is going pretty fast and he's running out of gas, so we pull over and get some more. The radio is on in the station, it's set to some talk radio, and the radio man is talking about Georgina's life. She was a single mother of 3, she was born up in Guellen, she was never late on her taxes, or to pick up her kid from school, she was a hairdresser for her friends, she went to bridge club on the weekends. Her family is begging that if she was kidnapped, someone should come forward with some sort of ransom opportunity, rather than simply selling her into whatever market they would've sold her into. They're even setting up a community fund in case they get a chance to buy her freedom from the kidnappers.

I get jerky and a big cup of orange drink that I put some coffee into. I give him 5 and he gives me back 2.91. We're back on the road and we're just soaring. Suddenly I start seeing the signs for

Bismuth. 180 miles north. I haven't been in years. It's such a huge city, so much bigger than Junestadt. We used to take field trips there in middle school on the train and I'd go to this one coffee shop that made drinks with all sorts of weird bullshit in it. Cinnamon and nutmeg and purple drank with a shot of espresso. They called that one "grape pie".

The countryside is vast to the left of our car, and to the right there's a hilly cliff that soars up with greenery somehow forcing itself onto every rock and crevasse. I light another cigarette and I lean back in the chair a bit. It starts raining a bit on the car but nothing too drastic. Mark puts out his fingers and I stick the cigarette in between them so he can drive.

We're going along and at a pretty fast pace and this motorcycle comes up alongside us and starts looking in our car. I get a bit paranoid, but Mark says, "he's probably just admiring my looks," and winks at the biker. He speeds up and cuts us off, speeding off in front of us. Mark is getting pissed and he decides to race him. He speeds up and the biker speeds up even more. The speedometer reads 120 and we're still accelerating. The bike is going steady and Mark is getting more and more nervous with every extra mile put on the speedometer. Soon enough he's starting to catch back up to the biker. We're blowing down too fucking fast, and I have to say it. "Mark, fucking quit it, we're running from the cops. Quit trying to get us pulled over."

Mark looks down at the speedometer. "Oh shit."

He stops accelerating. The biker flips him off. We slow back down to about 80. My heart calms down. The rain isn't so bad at this speed either.

We go for about 10 more miles and I see the biker by the side of the road. His bike is mangled around a tree about 40 yards away from him and his whole ass is just road rash. He must've had to bail. The radio is on and the radio man is talking about how I am now being named as the prime suspect in this case. They're suggesting theories about how I'm a violent tranny who first tried to force myself onto her and then when she refused and fought back I had no choice but to kill her and rape the corpse. They were taking call-ins.

"I feel like shit like this just makes our community look bad," someone with a gay accent said over the phone, "it confirms the right wing ideas of what queer people are. I feel like a lot of these trannies almost don't want to be accepted by society, like they want to just be outcasts, so they want to ruin it for the rest of us too. I say fuck him, he shouldn't have killed his boss like that."

"Thank you caller. Folks, this man has been masquerading as a woman for years now. He got illegal hormones from friends at school, he has never been formally diagnosed with gender dysphoria, and quite clearly, according to that last caller, he is not a representation of the broader gay community. I wanna make that clear, June County, he is not a representation of the broader gay community. Probably isn't even really transsexual! There are plenty of normal, god fearing, loyal, gays and lesbians out there. Let's take the next caller. Go ahead."

“Hello, am I on?”

“Yeah, you’re on, what’s your name, caller, if you’re alright saying it?”

“I’m Chanta.”

Shit fuck shit oh my god what is Chanta gonna say.

“And what have you got to say?”

“Well, look, I was Rodney’s roommate for a really long time. And I really do think he was convinced he was a woman. Or, sorry, he thinks he’s a woman. He’s not the one who’s dead here.”

“So you lived with him? Wow, how was that?”

“It was alright I guess, he always spent his time in his room, he would just talk to himself or read or write these shitty poems about how he wished he was born a woman and how unfair life is and how sad he is.”

“And tell us, did he ever talk about Georgina?”

“Oh, all the time. He hated that poor lady. He was always on about how she was so mean to him and how ‘today Georgina just decided to fuck with me all day’.”

“What do you make of these allegations, the sexual ones, made about Rodney and Georgina?”

“No, I don’t think those are true. If he killed her, and I mean he probably did he was a total coke fiend, it was probably because he didn’t like the way she was talking to him. I bet he strangled the life out of her right there in Popeman’s, didn’t even wait until the place was closed. He always talked about how it was always empty.”

“Well, thank you, Chanta, this has been an enlightening call to be certain. You have a safe night in this next storm, it’s supposed to be something nasty.”

“Thanks, bye.”

“During that interview, it was confirmed to me via police that Rodney is currently fleeing the city, that road blocks are being put up on the highway, and that anyone leaving the county should expect some blockages.”

“Shit did you hear that? They’re setting up roadblocks.” Mark was sighing when I told him.

“I heard.”

“Maybe we should get off the highway. Hide out for a little bit.”

“There’s no good place to hide between here and Bismuth. We’re just gonna have to go and hope we get out before they get any far ones set up. Hope we beat the wave, you know? Besides, we’re already 40 miles from Junestadt.”

I always hate when Mark says Junestadt. He always says it like “joon-state” when it’s supposed to be pronounced like “yoon-uh-shtat”. I guess it doesn’t matter. I can never go back there.

I give myself a second to stick my head out the window and get pelted by rain. It's cold and it gives me a brain freeze but it also helps me calm down and I can remember what I need to think about better. "So what's the plan then."

"I think we just go to Bismuth pretty much. It's pretty easy to get away in Bismuth. Lots of crime for sure. You can slip away if you just give a little name change and go around following the law."

I think about following the law. "What about your school and selling drugs and all the people that know you in Bismuth?"

"It'll be ok. We'll lay low. You'll see. I know a house we can stay at, anyways."

"I don't know, dude, you're like, established there. Won't they be able to just look at the people you know until someone squeals?"

"They won't squeal on me in Bismuth, you'll see. They love me there."

I look out the window.

Bismuth is there before I know it. The neon in the signs. The buildings all pressed up against each other. The homeless. The car jackings. The smashed windows. I felt like there was so much opportunity for me here before. Now I just feel like one of these rats, another criminal, outcast, outlaw. I wonder if someone will just kill me for the hell of it. I wonder if you can see the guilt on my face.

Mark pulls up to this place and it reminds me of a house out of a sitcom. There's a gnome in the yard and astroturf lawns interspersed by little gravel patches and stepping stones. There's big fake metal mushrooms that are breaking down and rusting from the rain. We parked the car in the garage. There was a motorcycle already in there.

"Who's house is this?"

"One of my friend's. He uses it in the summers. It's empty most of the year so I upkeep it for him and I can use it like a little safehouse. Isn't it fancy?"

I love when Mark gets excited about shit he used to like, like architecture and fashion. He starts talking like a bitch again which he's never done since he went to college and decided he wanted to be a frat bro so he could gangbang pledges with the rest of the boys and snort coke off each other's cocks.

We go in the house and it's quiet and still and clean and cool and dry. There's 3 bedrooms, I take the one nearest the top of the stairs. There's some rice a roni and canned beans so I make beans and rice to have for dinner.

"So we have to change our names," I say while I serve the rice and beans into two bowl, "What's your name gonna be?"

"I already got it all figured out. My name is Luke Reed. I'm from Texas, from Dallas, I used to ride in a biker gang."

“You don’t look like any of those things. You certainly haven’t been to Texas, and you aren’t a biker at all. You haven’t even ridden a bike.”
“Well, I’ll learn.” He looks so fucking smug. He reminds me of my dad.
“Pick something realistic. People aren’t gonna believe you.”
“Well what’s your alias? If mine is so shit.”
I think about it. I want a name like a female spy from a 1950s pulp novel. Something that makes me mysterious and cool. I picked Louise because it felt like me. But now I want to be someone else. “Call me Angel Vermouth.”
“Angel. Vermouth. Wow. Are you, like, a hooker? Or, sorry, call girl?”
“At least I’m not from Texas with a Cassander accent.”
“I can do Texas, watch,” then with the worst Texan accent I’ve ever heard, he says “Howdy, you got a hot minute to talk about the bible. I tell you huhuwhat, I ain’t never seen nothin’ tell me more than I’ve got on the horses, ‘ya heard guv’na.”
“Texans don’t say guv’na, guv’na.”
“Well, Luke Reed does.”
“Well, Luke Reed is gonna get us caught.”
I start eating my dinner.
“Fine,” he says, “Luke Reed, ok, because I like the name. I’m from Wyoming. Or, no, I’m from Florida. That’s nice and far. No one will have family.”
“Yeah, and I’ll be from up north. From Kanaden. Rohfell.”
“Ok, yeah, because you’ve got the German from school.”
“Yeah. It’ll be good. I can even do a pretty good accent. Like I’ve lived here for a long time, but I’ve still got a bit of the mother tongue left in me.”
“Perfect.”
The food is starting to get cold so I eat it faster. “Luke Reed” finishes his plate and “Angel Vermouth” needs to get herself a nap. They both retire to their chambers.
I’m laying in bed and I’ve got the window open and the rain is stopping and I can see the skyline of the city just a little bit. I can see Juniper Heights and Downtown Bismuth and I can even see one of the taller buildings at the State University of Bismuth. I feel for a second like I’m not on the run, like I’m finally getting my life together and living in the city and I’m gonna get more respect and make friends at the gay bars and have fun like I’ve been waiting to for years. Reality creeps back in and I feel this hollow knot in my chest and I start knocking on it and it makes this deep drumming noise like my chest has nothing more in it than the dusty air of a kickdrum.
I sleep for about an hour and when I wake up it’s dark. Mark is waking me up.
“Angel, Angel wake up. Look the police are here, we gotta get out of here.”

“Mark, why are you…”
“Baby, you gotta stop calling me by your ex’s name. Sorry officer, she hasn’t been feeling good for a few weeks.”
“Yeah, right. Hey miss, look you’re gonna have to leave, someone reported that you guys are staying here and we can’t get a hold of the owner. Your husband says that he’s got another place for y’all to stay.”
“Oh, sorry officer. Luke, help me up.” Mark helped me to my feet and I clutched my stomach and vomited. Mark looks impressed at my acting but really my head is throbbing and I think the vomit is just a symptom of that. I take some tylenol out of my pocket and swallow it. The cop is squinting at me. I bet he can tell I’m on drugs.
Mark helps me to his car and we get in and drive off.
“Sorry, they showed up and said they needed us to leave. They said that the neighbors reported us for burglarizing the house. We’re lucky, really. I think maybe Bismuth was a bad idea. Seems like it’s crawling with cops. We should get out of town.”
We get onto the freeway and we’re just tearing ass down the road. I swear he must just be begging for tickets all day every day. I can’t imagine why else he would be doing this. We get out of Bismuth and I see all the concrete and buildings and everything that I’ve wanted for my entire life melt away in front of me. I still can’t see out of my left eye. I might just be blind now. My head is just fucking throbbing and I can’t stop myself from sobbing in the passenger seat, my hands over my ears and my head between my knees, just heaving like a dying jack ass. It’s making all my make up run and I must look like an idiot to every driver that we pass. At some point I manage to calm myself down and I ask Mark another question. “They know what car we’re in, don’t they?”
“Uh, yeah, but it’s a common car.”
“OK, but they’ll stop us for sure, if they see us, right? And I mean they’re looking for us so they’ll probably see us once or twice at least.”
“Look, I don’t know, what do you want me to do?”
“Sell the car, get a new one. Or dump it and steal a new one.”
“I can’t steal cars, I don’t know how.”
“Just jack it, like in the movies. Run up with a gun, point it at them, get the car, and go.”
“OK, that’s fucking dumb. Now you’ve got a bigger rap sheet and it’s easier to track you. They got a line, a general direction. We want them to have no real way of knowing how we got away or where or anything.”
“Then we find one with the window cracked, we push it down a little, get it unlocked, find the keys, and take it.”

“No one is gonna leave us a car with the window rolled down and the keys inside. No one is dumb enough for that.”

I sit there and watch the rain beat on the windshield. How else can you steal a car if you don’t know how to hot wire?

“I got it. Wait ‘til nighttime. Go to a farmhouse, field house, whatever, go in the back door, a lot of the time they leave it unlocked because they barely even have neighbors, you grab a pair of keys, and take one of their trucks.”

Mark looks down the road a while and thinks about it. “Sure,” he says after a little while.

You get a certain distance from Bismuth and there really isn’t much. Least you get a grain silo every 30 or 40 acres. It’s wheat country up in the northeast. We’re going this bad stretch between this little village called Mulson and a town of about 30,000 called Erdnussstadt. There’s a big turn off and we take it into this little dirt road. Mark starts turning off the lights in the car, we lean back, and we start waiting for the time to pass.

The radio is on and the radioman is speaking and he says that stocks are at an all time high after that recession a few years back. The housing market is now more stable and profitable than it ever has been. People are finally getting back on their feet who lost jobs and opportunities from the 2003 oil pump closure out in Stansberg. The rain is not going to be letting up any time soon. The president is cutting taxes for the rich and sending more money to Afghanistan to root out terrorism. Coincidentally, taxes on alcohol and tobacco are being raised. The radioman says the word “tobacco” 3 times in one sentence and I have no choice but to chew on a cigarette. My head fucking hurts.

I light the cigarette and puff it and crack the window and Mark asks for one and I give it to him. He lights it and puffs it and he puts it out and tosses it out the window. “You still smoke menthols? What are you, 12?”

The rain is just pouring on the windshield, it’s sneaking in the window. “They’re already over us on the radio, you notice that. Maybe 6 hours ago, they were talking about us nonstop like we were Bonnie and Clyde. What happened?”

“Can’t have no Bonnie and Clyde anymore, Lou, news goes too quick. People all heard of murders before. They’ve got relatives that were murdered, people they know. They forgot about them too. Why not forget about us?”

“Maybe we should put out a statement.”

“So they talk about us? Let it stay quiet, we’ll get away better.”

I think about Bonnie. I think about the fame she had and how she got it and I wonder if after we steal this truck or whatnot that maybe we should rob a store too. The brain worm pulsates on the roof of my mouth and in the gums above my molars on either side, I can feel 6 or 7 in there, wriggling and trying to break out. I clench my teeth together to hold them in. They’re eating the roots of my teeth and I can

feel some of them getting loose. I click my tails against each other back and forth and it scrapes some of my nail polish off. I wish I was famous.

The cigarette is burning my fingers and there's a line of ash down my pants where I was holding it. I toss the butt out the window and roll it up. My entire right arm is soaked from the rain splashing off the door onto me.

Mark puts in a CD and it's this eurotrash techno bullshit that he always listens to. It's very loud and jumpy and it would probably be better if I was on x or drunk or in a club but contrasting against the beating of the rain against the windshield it just sounded like a bunch of noise.

It's dark as all hell. It's about 11 or 12. The clock in Mark's car refuses to be correct. My guess is 11 or 12.

We start driving on the highway again, and there's just about enough rain to make it hard to drive on in Mark's little street car. We're going maybe 45 or 50 and there's a big farmhouse just about a half mile down the road, it's got a big multi car garage with 4 doors on it that's detached from the house. We kill the headlights and let the car neutral up to the house, but really the sound of the rain has to be enough to mask any sounds we made. It's a Wednesday night so the lights in the house are all off.

Mark does up a rain poncho. It's clear and it shows his clothes under it. He flips his hat around to hold the hood open so he can see. He even got the flashlight out of his tire kit in the back seat. He turned it on and got out of the car. First he walks over to the garage, but it must be locked because he starts going over to the house. He tries the front door and it's unlocked. I see him look in with his flashlight and then this big black blob comes out of nowhere and he's down on the ground, the flashlight rolling away from him and getting busted on the rocks. He's struggling with whatever that thing is so I grab my gun and start running over. It's a dog, and it's on top of him chewing on his hand and arm, tearing at his flesh. I shoot twice and hit the dog somewhere around its ass. I think I shattered that joint that lets them walk right with their legs because it limps on three legs for a bit until it gets in the house and then it lays down to die. There are lights turning on upstairs in the farmhouse. Mark is getting up and shaking his hand. I run in the house and grab a key ring off the table by the door. I start running at the garage to open it and fumble with the keys for a second before Mark comes and takes them out of my hand and somehow guesses the right key on the first try. The door is open, he turns the light on, and we take a big white SUV. I throw open the garage door and jump in the passenger seat. Mark starts driving. We pull out and go a second before I hear a shotgun blast and the furthest back windows are shot out. All the lights in the farmhouse are on now and there's a wife standing in the doorway with a wireless phone, I guess talking to 911. There's so much rain I can't even see where the shooter is until he steps out into a lightstream made by the lights in the garage. I shoot back a couple times and the shooter shrinks back into cover. Mark pulls out their driveway onto the highway and we're blowing down the road at about 85 in no time.

Mark's arm is really ok, but that right hand must've ended up right in the hound's maw because it's got these lacerations and scratches all over it. There's a big scrap of skin hanging off his palm that must've gotten mangled and flayed. He's driving like he's still running from the farmers.

"That was fucking wild," I say.

"No shit."

"I didn't think there would be a dog."

Mark looks out at the road. "Me neither."

"You want, I should drive?"

"No."

I must've fallen asleep because it's 5 a.m and we're parked behind a big box store in Erdnussstadt and Mark is sleeping there. I must've got woken up by a big bolt of lightning hitting the pavement because my heart is racing and the rain is pouring harder than it's poured since last year. The shattered windows in the back are letting in a ton of water and the wind and humidity are making the entire car freezing cold. I turn the keys in the ignition and crank up the heater. Then I see that the car is almost out of gas. I wake up Mark.

"Let me drive, we need gas," Mark must've made a stop for some gauze and bandages because his hand is all wrapped up.

"Fuck, ow," he says. Then he shakes back to life like an electrocuted corpse and the color starts coming back into his skin. There's a big pack of water bottles in the back seat and I grab one and toss it to him.

"Look, let me drive," I tell him.

"No," he says, and he turns the car on.

"Let me drive."

He shivers again, his eyes are bulging red. He starts patting his pockets and noodling in them and he finds his coke and puts the little dime bag up to his nose and snorts it.

"Let me drive the car."

Mark puts his seatbelt on and takes the parking brake off and starts pulling off into a side road. I look around Erdnussstadt. It's a lot like Junestadt, aber there aren't too many big buildings. You can't see the downtown skyline because the buildings there are all 2 or three stories high. The side road that Mark pulls onto is full of cracks and potholes and that hand of his is just fucking vibrating. The early morning air is so frigid I can't tell if it's the pain from the wound or the cold or both. The car rattles a little as it drives and one of the wheels sounds like it's shaking itself back and forth on the bearings. Mark keeps driving, despite knowing what it feels like and what is happening.

"Get out and let me drive."

"I'm about to make you get out, if you don't shut the fuck up."

He takes us onto the main road and he starts driving again. Erdnussstadt is surprisingly big for its population sample. Most of the buildings are pretty run down, with the exception being the big box store that we were parked behind overnight. The town has boarded up shopfronts and warehouses and going out of business sales mostly in this one area on the main road toward the east side of town. You can see some people who got homeless after they lost whatever job or housing or food. They're setting up camps in the little insteps that shelter the front doors of these buildings from the rain. Some are ranting and raving. The rain is starting again.

The radio is on and the radio man is speaking and he says that It's now been a full day since me or Mark have been spotted. I kinda thought that if we made it a full day they'd stop looking for us. The radio man says that some bones have been found that some are saying might be Georgina's, but that they are too decomposed from being left in a suitcase for so long. I wonder how long the news thinks it takes for a body to decompose. 1 day? 2? I want to call in. Set the record straight. Say something like, "that's not the fucking body I left, Einstein, that's not how fucking decomposition works." I want to tell him that I'm not this evil tranny who's hell bent on killing people. I want the world to know my real name.

We pull into a gas station. Mark gets out and gets gas and I keep listening to the radio. They're taking calls. I can see Mark's hand through the window. The dirt on his sleeve is seeping into his lacerations. Some of his bandages are starting to fly around and off of his hand. On the radio a girl is talking about me, someone who knew me. They say that they saw me at Popeman's a lot, that they would always get chicken fingers from me. She says that they liked the way I smile and "she always seemed really happy to see me." She says she wonders what really happened that night, if I really even killed her, or if it's all some kind of ruse put on to make another lady disappear. The radio man argues with her.

"You think he's some kind of martyr? He's a murderer!"

"She isn't some killer, something happened that night, I know it, I wish I could've talked to her more but I hated sticking around Popeman's. It always stunk in there."

"So you don't even know him well enough to have contacted him. And I'm supposed to take your opinion on his character."

"Better than all the other people you have on here. Everyone just talks about what they saw in the news, and all they see in the news is what the cops tell them to print."

"So you think this is all some cover up?"

"I wouldn't be surprised. Wouldn't be surprised if Georgina is still alive, kidnapped, somewhere out in the woods with her hands bound, scared, and they aren't even looking for her."

The radio man hangs up, asks for another caller. This guy's got his own theories. "I think it might be worse than people think, man," he said as the radioman sat silently, letting him get out his dramatic conspiracy. "I wouldn't be surprised if he killed a lot of the girls in this area. Remember, like, back two

years ago when that little girl's body washed up in the Grossfluss, they went and killed her daddy for it."

I remember that happening, I was 12.

"I bet you this little freak has been killed before. I bet you he's running all around the territory, just killing women and little girls and raping their bodies and wearing their skin like some depraved satan worshipper."

"Well now, I've heard something about that before, some this morning about a local crack house getting raided and there were some 40 or 50 candles there for doing rituals. Are you suggesting, caller, that Robert was the one there in that house, plotting his wretched murders?"

"Look, radio man, I wasn't saying that before, but I might have to start saying that now."

"Well that does it then. If any of you out there have any information on this murderous, psychotic, satan worshiping transvestite, you call in and let us know before the police. Besides, how else you supposed to know if it's something worth calling in in the first place?"

I turn off the radio. I used to really like the radio man.

Mark sits down. He's done with the gas. He gets back on the road and we start to leave Erdnussstadt. There's a fog enveloping the streets. It's thick, it must've rolled in when I was focused on the radio, but when we get on the road you can really notice it. Maybe 4 or 5 feet of visibility. Mark is riding with his floodlights on, but they aren't really doing much. His hand looks like shit.

"You oughta let me wrap your hand up tight, you can't just let it fall apart like that."

Mark did one of those big huffs with his chest like men do.

"Or let me drive the car and do it yourself. It's not like I want to dote on you."

Mark squints and looks at the road. He's clearly having a harder time seeing even than I am. There's signs for fast food places turning the fog bright orange and yellow and red and blue in spots, there's the headlights and the floodlights and sometimes even the low beams of the oncoming traffic. Nothing really cuts the fog, it just makes it stronger really. Makes it harder to see through because it starts looking all the same pearly white with the light and that little yellow tinge from the cigarette smoke. Speaking of, I light one and roll the window down to let out the smoke. The fog is creeping in a fight against the air pressure inside the car. My smoke is caught there in no man's land.

We get out of Erdnussstadt and start looking for any building that looks abandoned. After all, that's the best option to hole up for a night or two without getting caught. We see some old rusted out silos but nothing that screams "here's the spot" so we keep going. The fog starts clearing after about an hour. There's a few more farmhouses, some corn fields, and then off in the distance you see it. Fallow land. Abandoned fields. Wild pasture. Whatever the hell it is. We take off on this little dirt road and go out there.

Mark is not a fun guy to shack up with. He has some serious mommy issues. Last time we lived together was when I was in high school, after my parents kicked me out. I came out at school and some people sent my parents letters in the mail. This was back in ‘01. I had to sleep in his room with him at his dad’s house, and he never cleaned anything in that room the 2 years I lived there. I slept on the floor so I had to keep things up, I put his clothes in the hamper and completed every other step until they were clean, folded, and put away. I made his bed and changed the sheets, I swept, I took the trash and the beer cans out, I did everything for him. And still he’d fucking complain. Treat me like his mama. Take me for granted.

We get to this abandoned ass house, looks like it hasn’t been cleaned in, I don’t know, 20 years. Rotted to hell, barely standing, the old fields that used to surround it are now overgrown with rose bushes and some small trees, there’s an entire ecosystem where, it seems, there used to grow wheat. We get in the house, take our shit out of the car, and I tell Mark we gotta park the car away from the house so people don’t think there’s anyone here. He gets all uppity and starts complaining to me about how much he’s already done today. I tell him this is the last thing that he’s gotta do for now and that he got himself into this as much as I got myself into it. He drives further down the dirt road and ditches the car in the woods. I get to work on the house a little bit, mostly I have to try and warm the hearth so that we can get some kind of heat going through the house. It’s freezing and wet from the air and the lack of heat and the months and months of rain.

Mark comes back and I’ve just barely got the fire started and he’s asking me about dinner. I tell him, “I don’t got no dinner, you think I just shit food out my ass. You gotta go kill something if you wanna eat.”

“Kill something? I’m not killing nothing.”

“So what, you ain’t a killer no more. Go out there and shoot some rabbits or something. Kill a quail.”

He sighs like a 4 year old being told he has to put away his action figures. His arm swings around wildly with the injury, and he’s holding a gun in his left hand, the hand he doesn’t usually use for much of anything. He moves a little and I see some liquid blood come out from the wrapping in his right hand. I wonder if he’s had any water.

Mark steps out and starts roaming the trees for small game. He’s trying to be quiet but he’s really a shitty hunter. Little frat boy. I start boarding up the hole in the ceiling in the main room. It’s only sprinkling a little right now the board won’t really hold much back. Maybe it’ll make this shack livable. There’s a little kitchen area, just a stove that isn’t hooked up to a gas line and a sink that’s frozen block solid. I don’t even try the light switch because I figure there’s no shot it hasn’t either been turned off or just broken off the grid.

Anyway, nails, pieces of the table, over the hold, nail it in. I do that for about 5 or 7 minutes and I look at it and it's actually not dripping right away. There's still big cracks but it used to just be a huge hole. There's a little cabinet that seems like it's breaking apart and the paper on the shelves is rotted away and yellow and green with mold. I can see the lip of the wall peeling off from the cement and leaving this drywall dust that collects in its own crack. The house swells and creaks and sways a little in the wind. There's a small mattress on the floor, an old twin, it's barely enough space for one person. It's either that or the car. I look around, there's a trash bag. If I had some tape I could make a little cover for the back window in the car. We can pick one tonight and in the morning we can decide which one is better. I touch the mattress. A little water comes out when I press my finger in it.

I put the mattress somewhere in the corner where it seems dryer and hopefully it can get a little dry. There's a fire place in this house, thank fuck, so we have some way of getting it dry. I go outside. All the dead wood is soaked with water or just so fresh and green that it wouldn't burn if you paid it. There's no such thing as dry grass in a climate like this. That's what my scoutmaster used to say.

When we were in the scouts and we needed to start a fire with wet wood we would use an accelerant. A lot of things can be accelerants. Fats, oils, metals, salts, even fine crude oil side products like gasoline. I don't have anything like that. I go into the car. I check the glove box. There's a stash of napkins and tissues and there in the back is the motherload, the alcohol towelette. I take them and a tissue and a little bit of cardboard and I stick them under my jacket to try and keep them dry from the drizzling. I go back inside and put them all in the fireplace. At least it's pretty dry in there, there's a little dampness still sitting from the last time the place got flooded.

There's a couple little tiny twigs sitting in the edges of the fireplace, and I start piling them in the middle. I go back outside and get some of the dead wood from this fallen tree, looks like it's been rotting for a long time, and it's like a sponge. It'll burn crazy quick but it'll burn, assuming I can get it dry. I get some sticks too, little ones off the edges. They're the same, soaked through and through like Carrie's tampons. I take them inside and pile them around the sides of the fireplace. Then I go back out. It's starting to rain harder. I grab as many large pieces of the rotten wood as I can. Then I get a couple pieces of wood that've fallen off the house, planks and floorboards. There's a part of the porch that's fallen apart and I drag some pieces over by the fireplace.

I make a plan in my head and take out my lighter and breathe on the tip to warm it up and dry it out a little bit. Then I stick the alcohol pad in the middle of the fireplace. There's still some ancient charcoal in the bed. I breathe on the lighter a little more and put the cardboard over the alcohol pad. Then I set up the twigs over the cardboard and the alcohol and I lean a few pieces of the rotten wood against each other over that. I light the alcohol wipe. It takes a second to take flame, but then it burns this flame that's clear and blue and hot. It lights the cardboard and the twigs after a couple seconds, and then it blazes up a little bit and some steam and smoke start billowing toward me. I open the vent so the

smoke can start going out of the house. I cough and my eyes burn and I yell a little while I rub them. The rotten wood starts getting this black film of soot building on it from the fire below, and the cardboard starts giving out. I put some dry-ish tree bark over the fire, and in only a few seconds it takes flame. I put more of the rotten wood over the flame and the first two pieces have a couple of areas starting to burn a short cinder, the fuel being so rotten and thinned out that it is unable to sustain itself long enough to really burn from the flame, instead burning like steel wool in these fractal patterns that come and go as each layer of cellulose is heated up and dried out.

Mark comes back. He's pale and cold and his lips are blued. Comes to the fire place. "How's it going here?"

"Almost got it."

Mark puts his hands up as if the fire could warm him in its current state. Eventually, after a few more minutes of burning the tree bark, the rotten wood starts to burn, and I begin to pile more around it. It burns quick and hot and with very little smoke. I send Mark to get more and he comes back with trip after trip of this wood and the fire starts eating it almost faster than I can put it in. The coals in the bottom of the ash pan are red hot. I go out with Mark and we carry in a more recent fallen tree.

"Did you find any food?"

"No," he says, "but I think I found a good spot, and don't you know trapping?"

"No," I say, "I don't."

Mark's smile drops. We put the tree down by the fire to dry out. We track a ton of still green leaves all over the floor. My makeshift patching of the roof seemed to only serve to stream all the water into one spot by the front door, so me and Mark are both pretty wet from getting hit with that. The storm grows.

The fire is starting to come together, the brittle rotten logs are almost run out and we stick one of the ends of the dead tree in the fire to start hopefully burning. We go out and collect more rotten branches and green new fallen wood. A lot of it is still attached to the tree by the bark, like a leg that's been completely severed but still dangles on by a flap of skin. I light a cigarette. Mark takes out the coke bag and we start rubbing it into our gums. There's still so much, I wish we could have a party.

Mark lies down and starts moving his hands really fast. "I can't believe it, you know, all this is actually, like, so artistic. We are living, like really living. Do you feel that in you? That we're getting better at all this?"

"Getting better?" I say, "you mean that you're learning how to do this. I already know what I'm doing."

"Apparently you don't know trapping."

"I don't know trapping because we didn't learn trapping. I know the other shit, I started a fire with wet wood on the first try."

“Oh whatever, so what are you the mommy then?”

“Yeah, a little. Don’t fucking call me that.”

Mark lights a cigarette and pushes the log a little further into the fire. His hand where the dog bit him is just barely bleeding now. He starts fumbling with the bandage and eventually I get sick of watching him so I just wrap it back on tight and wrap a little piece of cloth over that.

“We should get some alcohol,” I tell him.

“Some nice bourbon.”

“No, rubbing alcohol. And a suture needle and some stitches or whatever those doctors use.”

“It’ll be alright.”

I know he’s not telling the truth, but I don’t say anything because I think he really believes it. I get outside and gather more wood. There’s green pine piled up by the banks of this little stream. It’s as wet as wood can be. It soaks my hands when I pick it up and by the time I get back to the little farmhouse my hands are numb and I’m freezing. I dump the wood by the fire and I warm up my hands and I chew the nails off all my fingers until I bite one down to the nailbed and my spit stings it and I try and dry it off on my pants but my pants are soaking wet. The sun is going down so I try and get some more wood together but the light fades quick and I just end up dragging another fallen tree over that’s so rotted out that chunks are falling off and being left like a trail of breadcrumbs behind me. I give myself a little break by the door and open it and Mark is putting a big thing of jerky in his mouth and eating it all as fast as he can and I scream at him and I scream and I scream and I scream because I have done everything I have gotten all of the wood I have started the fire I have patched the roof I have done everything and all he did was sit there and he’s eating all that food and he’s not sharing and he’s doing it on purpose and fuck fuck fuck I hate him.

“Mark, what are you eating?” I ask him.

His mouth is stuffed full he looks like the world’s dumbest fucking chipmunk like Alvin if he had a fucking foot for a head and wore pants.

“Nuffuw,” he says. The fucking coward bastard the piece of shit lying to me like a 2 year old drunk on mommy’s no-no juice. I light a cigarette and I smoke it half down and I put it out on his face and I tear his nose off and cook it over the fire and eat it and it’s chewy and fatty and sinewy and he’s sitting there screaming for me to give him back his nose but I already ate it.

“Why wouldn’t you share some with me?” I ask him.

He chews it and swallows. “I’m sorry, I just, I was hungry. I should’ve got you some at the store. I didn’t want you to feel bad about not getting it.”

“I’m not- I don’t feel bad about not getting it, I didn’t like ‘miss out’ on your jerky.”

He squints at me. “So… what’s the problem then?”

I dig a knife into his chest and I watch that look on his face as he feels the last feeling he will ever feel, that feeling that feeling that feeling that feeling the draining of life the death the kill the knowledge of death the knowing of your own demise.

"I just would've liked to eat tonight is all."

"Well, I mean I told you that there was stuff out there."

"Yeah and you didn't fucking go get any of it."

"I was warming by the fire."

"I- heh- yeah, I also would've liked to get warm by the fire, but instead I was getting the fire together, I made the fucking fire and I've been feeding it this whole time and you've just been dicking around haven't you?"

"No, I went out I tried I just didn't find anything I could shoot."

"Why? You said you saw animals. And besides there's fucking snails on the backsides of rocks or those leaves, what are they called, they grow with a strong central stalk and they cover the entire ground in some places."

"I don't know what the fuck you're talking about, but I am not gonna eat fucking snails for dinner."

"Well, fuck, I would've. Maybe if you had taken over. Or just shared the fucking food you had. Let me see that."

I take the empty bag of jerky from him. It's the biggest size they sell. It was a pound and a half of jerky. He's probably been sneaking pieces this whole time. He was probably eating it while he "looked" for animals to eat. I wait until he gives me his hand to suture and I botch the job, splitting his vein and spilling his blood in a relentless stream into the air and down onto the rotten carpet in this shit farmhouse. The color and strength and life in his face fades quickly and it's replaced with panic and he jumps up and yelps and screams and his hand flows as though the floodgates of some awful place had been opened and his lungs yell and scream and he calls out to a god he long ago abandoned and the god does not save him and he wouldn't've even if he could've.

"Well I'm sorry I was just hungry."

I glare at him the way I do that makes the tops of my eyes hurt and I get the coke bag and I dip my finger in and I rub the powder that sticks to it against my gums. It gives me another little jolt of energy and pleasure and I light a cigarette. It keeps going out because half the pack is soaking wet. I gotta get another cigarette case.

We put the rest of the wood on the fire and go to sleep. It's probably only 7 or 8 but I can't stand being around him and try my best just to forget he's there and that I'm mad at him. I think about all the things I want to do now that I'm not stuck in Junestadt. I think probably go somewhere totally different, like maybe New York. That would be nice, a real city, not like Bismuth or Junestadt or Erdnussstadt. I could

go there and have my new name and just live. Be real and authentic and live the kind of life I want to live and see the concrete and the buildings and the streetlights and the people and just be there where things go on.

I dream about this movie I saw when I was a kid where a woman seduces a man and gives him a blowjob. She sits by the door of a coffee shop and she sits there every day and she sees him and eventually he takes notice of her and she starts wearing more makeup and corsets and dresses and she loses weight and keeps doing this until he is ravenous over her and then she blows him and that's the end of the movie. In some ways I respect this decision; I too have found myself in the position of not really wanting to go through all the trouble of rearranging my organs for a guy and just sucking him off instead. However, what I've never understood is that if I really liked a guy, enough to lose weight and change the way I look and everything for him, I for sure would also want him inside me. I would press him up against a wall and ride him like a dildo if I got the chance. I would not do this little tasteful blowjob and just let that be it, I need to get my rocks off too, kid.

Me and Mark have been living in this run down shack in the middle of fuckall Erdnussstadt outskirt farmlands, bullshit failed ass peanut farm out in the middle of fucking nowhere for 2 days and I swear to god if he complains about my shooting again I'm gonna fucking kill him. We need to move too. Thank god. Next time, we're getting a motel room.

I pack our things and by things I mean the coke and my purse and the lighter and my cigarettes. I somehow managed to patch that damn hole in the ceiling yesterday enough that when it started pouring last night it actually didn't break and I didn't get as wet overnight as I had the night before. I'm pretty sure that raccoons live up there and in the rest of the house. They hunt at night and when they kill something they take it in the wall and usually it's still alive and you hear the thing screaming and crying and begging for its life like a kid coming home late at night from the corner store and the raccoons are merciless and they kill it anyway and they tear it apart and eat it in a communion not too much unlike the masses I've attended.

I sit in the car with Mark and before we leave we listen to the radio. The radioman is garbled and I can only hear about half of his words, but he's talking about a big upset in college football. Some team out of Texas beat Bismuth U and now the city has lost about 10 million dollars to the local casino. This was an upset because the Texans were very poor this season with a 2-7 record and Bismuth was looking much better at 6-3.

I always wanted to gamble in a Bismuth Casino. I'm still not old enough, but it was something I was always gonna do for my 21st birthday. I doubt my likeness will be allowed most places in Cassandria in the next 2 years. Maybe for my 30th I can come back.

Mark turns the engine over and we pull back. It takes a second for the wheels to find traction, they set in from the streams forming under the tires in this endless goddamn rainstorm. He gets the car out of

the holes it dug itself and up over into the dirt road, which has washed out slightly more in the past couple of days and in a way that I was not expecting for some reason but which made the entire car lean over to the driver's side pretty drastically.

We get out onto the highway and the radioman is coming in strong now and he's talking about us again. There's a search for us in Bismuth now, they said. Then he says, "The guy, Mark, this idiot I swear, he stole an SUV up by Erdnussstadt. Why do we know that? The guy stole it from his uncle! Was ein Idiot!"

"What the fuck Mark? What the fuck? What did he just say? Did you steal this from your fucking uncle?"

"Well, I knew where the keys would be and-"

"MARK. WHAT THE FUCK."

"Look, it's ok, like he doesn't need it really."

"The whole point of stealing a car was that we wouldn't be identifiable because they wouldn't fucking- ugh, what the fuck is the point, you aren't made for this world, you aren't fucking smart enough for it."

Mark stops the car on the side of the freeway. "Shut the fuck up, Lou, I swear one of these days I'm gonna have my fucking patience through with you."

"Oh what, are you the big ma-"

"You think I'm not made for this world? I run this world. I've been committing crimes like this since before you ever even thought about murdering your boss."

"I did not fucking murder my boss," I screw up my eyebrows and try to run my fingers through my hair but my hand gets stuck on this rat's nest that's formed under my right ear.

"Yes you fucking did, and whatever I got involved, but you gotta know that you did that."

"I did not fucking murder her, ok, I just-"

"You killed her in cold blood, you knew you were gonna do it when you went in."

I sit back in the seat and I look forward. I have my gun in my jacket pocket and I fiddle with the grip and rub it and think about killing again. He's really given me every reason the past few days. I take the coke bag out. The heater in the car has managed to dry me out enough that I can take actual bumps so I put some in my fist and I sniff it and then I do it again and again for a minute and then Mark takes a few bumps too and I just say "whatever" and we get back on the road while Mark sniffles like a 5th grader who refuses to blow his nose.

We pass through another town and then another and another and they're all so small and most of the time I don't even bother looking at the signs to tell me where I am. The air is thick and the rain is stopped and everything is green because it's going to rain again soon. There's one town where a building catches my eye: it's this tall whitewashed tower attached to someone's house, the house is white too, and the paint is thinning and chipping and peeling in some places and the tower is wooden

and it leans a bit off to one side but you can just barely make out that there's this table there inside and I imagine myself up at the top of that tower with a little notebook looking out at this little town and writing poetry about all the rooftops and the height of the trees and the rain and the color of the land.
We stop at a gas station and Mark fills the tank and goes in and gets himself a bottle of bourbon and a coke and for me he got a red bull and for both of us 4 hot dogs and two bags of chips. We ate ravenously. It was the first seasoned food we'd had in 2 days. I was eating snails and a single squirrel I turned over the fire. Mark drinks about half the bottle. I finally get to drive. And I'm gonna go get us a new car.
Mark sits half awake and it's late, probably about 11 or 12, and we're doing that same old prowl for a quiet looking farmhouse. This time I pick a spot next to some corn fields that are already picked clean for the season. I turn off the headlights and start pulling up to the house. I run the engine as quiet as I can and I keep the car in neutral and roll it up a bit more. Mark gets in the driver's seat as I get out, we're gonna ditch this SUV somewhere else. There's a farmhouse and a truck sitting outside of it. The truck is a little dirty but it seems pretty new, it looks like a late 90s model.
I get a little lower and try and stay light on my feet. The rain is trickling and the crickets are going wild off in some brambles by some perpetual puddles to the north of the house. I start walking up the stairs in the front. I'm trying to be quiet. I try the door and it's unlocked. I swing it open and try the next door, I do this slowly and try to stay quiet, but I still hear a little click as the knob rejects me.
There's some windows and probably a back door. I figure I'll at least try a window first. I nudge on one a bit and it doesn't seem like it's unlatched. I give up on the window idea and go back down the stairs. At least there's no doggy door.
The back door of the house has this big patio with a lot of nice chairs with big pads and cushions lining them. They're all set out on this wooden deck and everything is absolutely soaked in water. There's a swimming pool too, and it's full of water and overflowing constantly and there's algae growing in the bottom of it and they really ought to take the plug out of it and just let it seep into the ground instead of keeping it like this. I try the back door and it's unlocked. They always think you're gonna give up with the front door.
The door swings open and I come in and try and shut it quiet behind me. There's a kitchen and I'm surprised at how quiet it is in the house. I can hear my heartbeat in my ears. I can feel the quiet in my teeth. It's warm. Someone's definitely home. I start walking around in the dark and I get out my phone and open it up so I can use the screen to get a little light. I start making my way through this house that seems so much bigger now that I'm in it. There's a staircase to the left in the hallway and to my right there's a dining room and then I see it. A fireplace and above it is a shotgun. A 12 gauge two barrel granddad shotgun. I put my phone away and my eyes are pretty adjusted to the dark and I start taking the gun down off the wall. I click it open and it's loaded and everything. Then someone sacks me and

tackles me down to the ground. He shines a flashlight in my face and says, “Got you you little fucker.” I swat at him and something cuts my hand. I can’t see anything with that fucking light in my face but I swat a couple more times and he laughs and hits me a couple times in the face and he’s sitting over my chest. He drops the flashlight on my face and starts trying to pin my arms down to the ground but I’m thrashing and fighting and I get my fingers on his face and figure out whereabout it is and he hits me a few more times in the face. I get one of my fingernails and scratch him in the eye and it feels wet against my finger so I think I must’ve cut it pretty good. He starts howling like pissed off men do and he leans a bit to one side and I hit him in the face and he goes a little more and hits me back. I feel around behind me and I find the shotgun right by my head and I swing it over and the shells fall out and the weight of the metal swings the gun shut and the barrel decks him in the left cheek and he falls off of me. He covers his face and screams and wails and I start getting up a little and he starts coming at me in the dark with that knife, covering his bleeding eye with one hand and waving the knife around wildly in the dark. He cuts my left hand on the palm and I cock one of the barrels of the gun and fire it at him and it doesn’t work because there aren’t any shells in it and it gives me that click instead of the world shattering bang I wanted. He laughs at me and grabs the barrel and I grab his wrist where he has the knife and we fight back in forth in this full body arm wrestling and he’s much heavier than me. He swings me into the wall and presses me up against it and slams the barrel of the gun against the wall but I hold off his knife and I start pushing it toward him like I saw in the movies but when I get it close to his face instead of holding the knife for me to cut him with he just drops it and reaches in and grabs a fistful of my hair and starts twisting my neck around for a second before I get the willpower to withstand the pain in my head and I stomp down on his toes with all my weight and break a few of them since he’s barefoot. He yelps and hollers and spits in my face with all his screaming and pushes harder into me but I start grabbing at his wounded eye and he closes it tight but I push my thumb into the corner of his eye by his nose and crushing it into the outside of his skull and when he pulls back from the pain he takes both his hands with him and I belt him a few more times with the barrel of the shotgun until he’s writhing in pain on the floor. Then I kick him a few times and stomp on his chest and his head and his neck and he stops whining.

My hand hurts. I open my phone again and I look around and find a lightswitch. I turn it on. I see the man on the floor. He’s older, probably late 40s early 50s, he’s got a beer gut and a goatee and he looks like he really thinks himself tough. It seemed like he was about my height but really he’s about half a foot shorter than me. There’s blood all over his face and his neck is broken and he’s dead. He has this face that you would see in someone who was tortured to death. I unlock the front door and wave Mark to come inside.

Mark sees the body on the ground and he doesn’t seem too surprised. He takes a closer look at him while I go in the kitchen and start cleaning my wounds. I show him the shotgun and say that we’re

taking it. Mark looks around outside to see if there's some wood or something. He doesn't find wood but he finds a few gas cans. I pull the SUV up to the front door of the house and we put the body in the back with the gas cans. I go upstairs and find a whole bunch of ammo for the shotgun. The man didn't own any other guns from what I can tell, I looked for a case or a safe or anything. I also take all the toilet paper from the bathroom and all the canned food and the towels and rags and I cut some up with scissors in the kitchen to make bandages for now both me and Mark's hand wounds.

I take the SUV and Mark gets the truck from the man. We drive on the freeway for another hour stretch and pull off before this little town at the base of the mountain. We pour the gasoline all over the body and the upholstery of the car and toss the rest of the can in the front seat. Then we toss a match inside and snort some coke and watch. I light a cigarette. The fire starts quickly with the gasoline fumes and makes this small fireball as all the air in the car is pushed out in a burst of heat before being immediately sucked back in to replace the air pressure. Then it starts just burning, and it burns quick. It's not like Georgina's fire. Georgina's fire had this buildup, this one it's just going on every orifice of the car. The gas can in the front melts and burns and all the plastic burning in the car makes this disgusting black and grey smoke that pours out and is illuminated by all the lights on the roof of the car until the lights burn up and out and explode from the heat and then the only light is from the fire. The body smells like a candle made from butter or olive oil. It's like whale oil burning in a lamp. I watch and smoke and the flesh burns just as all flesh does, but the blood boils against itself and it blackens quickly before it burns, the bones shatter as the marrow abandons the rest of the structure and the damaged eyes pour back into the skull like jelly.

Mark tosses his cigarette butt in the fire and lights another one. The gas tank has caught fire and so has the oil in the engine and there's flames spewing out the side of the car. It melts the rear passenger side tire and the car takes a distinct tilt toward that side as all the air escapes not in a hiss but like a puff of wind. I toss my cigarette butt in and take another bump. I light another cigarette. The metal on the passenger side of the car is melting and warping from the flames spewing out the gas tank, and the gas starts to bubble out and leave these puddles of liquid fire that mix in with the water on the ground and burn on top of them before putting themselves out from lack of fuel. The car starts to crumple in on itself a bit and the frame starts to fail as the entire underside of the car is superheated by the oil fire and the fire in the gas tank. The other rear tire is melted and the car looks as though it has hydraulic suspension and it's been converted into a lowrider. A hole forms in the roof of the car and the flames start spewing out of it. Then, as the fire runs out of fuel, the burned out shell of the car sits there smoldering at about 800 degrees with the blackened skull of the man sitting patiently in the center of the trunk on a burned out seat, little pieces of carpet upholstery melted into it and burned up into soot that leaves this sort of glossy texture as a byproduct. I toss the cigarette butt and I get in the truck.

I drive us offroad for a while out here in these foothills and Mark finishes his bourbon and gets pretty drunk. It's very dark and I'm just looking for a place for us to sleep. I pull around this little area and see a farmhouse out in the distance and then there's a few barns and very close to me is this little shed. I figure we can stay there, it looks upkept. There's enough space behind it that I can park the truck out of view of the house. Mark is passed out in the truck.

I open a can of peaches and drink the juice out of it. Then I start eating it slowly one piece at a time with two of my fingers. Soon I start using my whole claw, scooping the fruit up directly into my mouth. The tang burns my chapped lips and the cuts on the inside of my mouth. I choke down the peaches and there's maybe a fifth of the can left and I tap the side of it a few times to loosen it all up and I dump it in my mouth. Some of the juice splashes over my face and gets in my eyes and I close them tight and chew and tip the can back down and I wipe my face off on my sleeve and swallow and do it again until the can is empty. I look over at Mark. Then I get out of the truck and run as fast as I can to the shack so I can see what's going on.

The shack is latched from the outside and the metal is pretty rusted on. I knock it with my boot a couple times and it comes free. I open up the door and take out my phone and open it up and take a look around. There's a ladder leading to this little attic sort of ledge on top, and I climb up there. It's dry and there's a lot of dust and grime covering everything. I sweep some of it out onto the floor below and I lay down on the soft pine and sleep.

I wake up and there's just barely any light and there's someone there on top of me. He smells like liquor and he's shushing me. He has my hands pinned and he weighs much more than me and he's got my pants pulled down and his cock grinding on my ass. I yell.

"Get the fuck off me!"

"Shhhh shh it's ok."

"No! Fucking stop!"

He spits on my ass and sticks his finger in. It's cold and callused and it hurts and he wrenches it in and out of me and I just struggle and it doesn't matter. He takes his finger out and spits again and puts his cock in me.

"You fucker, get the fuck off me I swear to fucking god-"

He pushes my face down into the wood and my lips get pressed up against my teeth and I can't move my mouth. He's really bad at fucking, it hurts like a motherfucker and I'm gritting my teeth trying not to get caught squatting in this shitty fucking shack. He starts moaning like he's close already and he starts touching my dick.

I'm trying to convince myself that none of this is real and I'm not really me and I'm just a doll like last time this happened to me and then he says, "come on Rodney, you owe this to me, after all I've done for you."
Something clicks for me and I twist my head and throw him off balance and push him backwards off of me and all at once his dick comes out of me tearing some of the skin and he goes hurdling down about 7 feet to the ground. I get myself up and touch my ass and it's smeared with spit and blood and I pull my pants up and get the keys for the truck out and kick Mark a few times while he writhes on the ground. I get in the truck and leave up into the mountain.

Part 3: Rabbit

In the early morning I go out to a donation box for a little thrift store in this mountain town. There's all these cardboard boxes sitting out there that are just filled with all sorts of shit so I take a couple of them in the passenger seat of the truck and I sit there and look through them a bit and then leave. There's a lot of clothes I bet I could wear. I didn't realize how bloody I'd gotten.
The radio is on and the radioman is speaking and the radioman says there is a new missing person's case in the quiet village of Treachery last night, that they are speculating as to whether there is a serial killer in Cassandria. They say that a man was not home when his wife returned from her graveyard shift at the local animal hospital, she found the front door wide open and blood spilled. Their things had been rifled through and a family heirloom shotgun had been stolen from above their mantle. They wonder if I am a serial killer now. Nothing about Mark though. Maybe he's smart enough to just keep running.
I'm going north. I know that. The mountains run from the northeast up in Kanaden southwest to here. Maybe I could skip the border. It would be a drive though. Wie gut ist mein deutsch? Kann ich ein Kanadener sein? Ich meine nicht. Ich kann nicht gut sprechen.
I pull into a church parking lot and it's already in German and I'm still 400 miles from the border. I feel less confident by the moment in the prospects of immigrating to Kanaden. But also I don't know what else to do so I start looking through the clothes. There's a few dresses and some other shit but mostly it's just full of a lot of kids clothes. I find a blouse and a jacket in the bottom, and the jacket is kinda big, so I put them both on and I feel at least more covered up. My shoes are still bloody. I drive up to this stream by the side of the road and I take off my shoes and wash them. Then I wring them out a bit and put them on the floor in the passenger seat to dry.
October is about to begin. My shoes are wet. The air is wet and the shoes aren't drying out at all. There's another storm in the air. Everything looks green.

I drive barefoot for about 3 or 4 miles. The wind keeps beating in this little crack in the rear windshield and it's starting to piss me off. I start messing with the little sliding window that leads out to the back of the truck. It jerks a little bit but now the sound is even louder and it's different, before it was this sort of wind noise and now it was high pitched, like a whining dog or a dying person.

I deal with the noise for a bit. I'm on the highway, going in these big twists and turns. The town is cute, whatever it's called, the whole place is whitewashed and it's not been maintained since the season started and the paint is peeling slow in these big gaps and marking the white with these clear patches of brown all over like shit colored polka dots.

It starts raining pretty hard and then pretty immediately it starts hailing. There's this mix of hail and rain and it grows in places and beats down and I can't see anymore so I pull over to the side of the road and wait for a minute. There's plenty of cars more bold than me, they pass me with their brights on getting beat down on and bouncing back up. The little crack in the window is letting in cold air and water and I start struggling with it. It's stuck on this rubberish gasket that lines the window. I try jiggling it to knock it loose and it just knocks it a little more open and then jams it again. I open the glove box. There's a couple gloves and a first aid kit and the truck's manual. I open the first aid kit and pull out some medical tape and rip a couple pages out of the owner's manual and tape them over the gap in the window and try and make it airtight. The tape doesn't stick very well and I really gotta smear it on there to get it to stay on the glass. The pages start soaking with water and slowly they fall apart from little fragments of ice.

The hail stops and the rain gets manageable by the windshield wipers so I pull off. The wind beats into the paper and blows chunks of ice cold wet paper all over the dashboard and the windshield. The truck's tires are offroaders but the suspension is not the best anymore so I am somewhat stable but the bumps are really freaking me out. The highway turns into this little town with a French name that I don't care to read.

I bring my truck through a bit more into the storm and the sun is fully out now but you might not guess it from the cloud coverage. The road is slick and there's occasional car crashes with people out waving their arms looking for help but nobody else has stopped for them and certainly I won't be the one. The wind beats into the hole in the window and it makes the car fucking freezing. I put some of the extra clothes in my lap like a blanket.

There's a diner and I pull up to it to wait out the storm. There's a few other people inside when I walk in, not many. The roof is made of sheet metal and the waitress is wearing one of those old school waitress uniforms like it's the 1950s. There's an Elvis song on the radio. I sit at the bar and the waitress comes over. She has a thick Kanadener accent, but I suppose this far north one would hear a lot more of that.

"Was kann I get for you, dear?"

“A cup of coffee, and some eggs and bacon. And toast. And uhm-” I check the money is in my pocket, “3 pancakes. And a slice of pie. Do you serve sandwiches?”

“Yes, we have the egg salad and ham and swiss, and we have the grilled cheese as well.”

“I’ll take four of the ham and swiss to go please.”

“Ok, dear.”

She walked off and got me my coffee and a little dish of cream and a little box of sugar cubes. I put two sugars and pour some cream. The cream hits the bottom of the mug and burrows up the sides and mixes itself in and I stop pouring. I drink the coffee and I say, “and could I get some water?”

The waitress brings me water and soon after she comes back with a stack of 3 pancakes. I pour syrup all over them. I can’t remember the last time I’ve eaten. Before I know it half the pancakes are gone and I’m cutting up the rest and getting ready and shoveling them down. Then she brings me the eggs and bacon and toast and I eat them greedily like my life depends on it. She brings me the bill with the pie and the sandwiches, packed in this little paper bag. I finish the food and the coffee and she refills my cup and I drink more of it. I light a cigarette and drink coffee and eat my pie. It all happened so fast, I didn’t consider that I was grunting like a pig. I bet they think I look disgusting too, in my shitty little donation box clothes. What if one of them donated this jacket?

I get the bill. 23. I put down 30 on the table and think about the waitress and put down another 20. I got another 9900 to burn through anyway. I take my sandwiches and go.

The road is narrow and winding. It follows this mountain range all the way through, in this little passage between each peak. There’s a few turn offs to small, unreliable towns, with gas stations that are closed more than half the day and where you can only pay in cash. I pull into one to fill the tank.

The town is called Grass and it’s got this station they call the “Grass Station” and I go in and the first thing I notice is a camera in my face recording me. The second thing I notice is the guy staring at me from behind the counter. “Welcome, there, girlie. My name is Rufus,” he says and he taps his name tag like he’s rehearsed this a thousand times, “how can I help you?”

“I need about 15 on pump 2 and let me get something in here.”

Someone runs out to pump my gas and I walk to the back of the store to grab myself a few drinks. I grab cola and lemon lime soda and I get myself a coffee. I bring it all to the counter.

“Altogether it’ll be 21. How will you be paying?”

I don’t say anything, I just get the money out of my pocket and I take out 2 twenties and I hand them over and take the things. The shopkeeper grabs my wrist as I’m leaving and says, “I seen your picture on the TV, kid, they say you’re a killer.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“What’s your name, huh?”

“Angel.”

“Angel, right. Angel. What else?”
“Vermouth.”
He looked at me with a squint. “Wait right here.”
He walks to the front door of the station and calls out, “Jeremy, come in here.”
In a minute a teenager with a thick northern accent comes running up. “Vhet’chu need.”
“This woman here, do you recognize her?”
The teenager looks closer at me. He squints the same way as Rufus. “Wer ist sie supposed to be?”
“Louise. The tranny from Junestadt. Remember, on the TV.”
“Oh, aber Vater, der Radioman said what she was going east, yes, and this ist nicht in der Nähe, yes? How could this be her?”
“Look closer, child, and look at her eyes. Look at her mouth. They are the same.”
“Many people look this way. It is none of my business whether or not she is the killer.”
I start inching my way toward the door. Rufus is turned to face his son and his son is talking about ideals of anarchy and freedom and communism, saying that even if I were the killer he wouldn’t rat on me. I get my hand on the door handle.
“Stop right there,” Rufus yells, and when I look over at him he’s training a shotgun on me. He’s got this look in his eye like he’s been waiting to use it. The gun looked me down and decided I wasn’t worth it.
“Now back away from the door. You ain’t just getting out of this one.”
“I just wanted some gas and some drinks. I just wanna get back on the road.”
“Where you fleeing, huh killer? Kanaden I bet. Yeah, go freeze and get shot by the mob.”
“I ain’t fleeing, I’m just trying to get back on the road. Now let me go before I call the cops.”
“Oh yeah, the cops. Jeremy, call the cops.”
Jeremy stands still, “I don’t really want to do all that. What kind of cop is gonna help us?”
“Call the damn cops.”
“There’s no shot, I’m not calling no cop, I won’t be a class traitor.”
“Fucking me, Jeremy, you ought to pull your head out of your ass every once in a while.”
Rufus goes to call the cops. He starts struggling with his ancient rotary phone and eventually in a slip of mind takes the gun off of me. I take mine out of my pocket and point it at him, then I run up and grab his gun before yelling for the two of them to put their hands up. Jeremy is hard in his pants. I’m pointing the shotgun now at the two of them. I click it open and make sure there’s actually bullets in the thing. There really are, two red shells sticking out of the chamber give me this big warm smile and beg to be blasted into these two fools.
“Now, don’t be stupid, little girl, give me back the gun. You need to turn yourself in.”
“Shut up, old man, I don’t listen to freaky old creeps. Now you listen to me. Give me the tape from the camera. You, what is it, Jeremy, now. Give me the whole tape, don’t fucking skimp me out. And you,

old man, you go around, you get me some fucking food and some alcohol, get me a few bottles from behind the counter too, and a few cartons of cigarettes, and give me that fucking money, hurry the fuck up the two of you. I wanna see it happen faster, gimme that tape. That's right, shut up you blubbering idiot. Go get me the cigarettes and the alcohol, fucking quick. Shut the fuck up, don't give me any back talk. Let me see that phone. Shut up, old man, I'll fucking kill you. I said shut the fuck up. Get in the fucking bathroom. Hurry up, get in there."

"Wait," says Jeremy, "wait, let me come with you. Bitte schoen, I need to escape this town, please let me come with you."

"Shut up. Shut up. Ok, Sit down, let me," I open a pack of menthols off the display and puff it for a second. "Fucking hell that's stressful. What'dj think this is, kid, Bonnie and Clyde? You wanna come with me?"

"I can help. I know how to shoot that gun. And I speak good German. Sprichst du Deutsch?"

"Ja, ich spreche Deutsch. Ich werde okay."

"Ok, ok, but I can still help. Second person to carry a body."

"You won't like it though."

"What won't I like?"

"I've gotta kill him. I gotta kill your dad and dump his body, and if you don't help me I'm gonna kill you too."

"Why?"

"The two of you are rats, loose ends. You wanna know why I killed Georgina? She was gonna rat me out to the cops. She was on the phone dialing the number and I did her in. For coke. She was gonna send me off to prison. Same thing your dad wants to do. He'll call the cops, they'll get a new lead on me. I'm not a ghost escaping in the night, I'm a truck moving north through the Cassandrian mountains."

Jeremy looks down at his shoes. His dad is in the other room, cowering in fear. I think he's hard of hearing, if I were hearing all this I would be crying a lot louder. He looks over at his dad. He closes the door.

"Do what you will, I'll rig it to burn."

Jeremy walks out the front door. I creak open the door and push it with the barrel of the shotgun. A beam of light enters the dark office. There's a desk with a black office chair, the computer monitor is big and bulky in the back and there's a few pictures of family and loved ones. Rufus is cowering on his knees, he has both his hands up and he's trying to block the vision of me, like I'm the monster standing in the corner of his room at night, and as long as I'm out of sight I'm not actually there. The gun is heavy in my hands, the stock is all wood and the metal is blackened with dirt and grime and soot. There's even a layer of dust built up over the hammers that I have to scrape off before I feel

comfortable cocking one of them back. I don't cock it though, I have another idea. I approach Rufus like he's a scared puppy, he's got half his body broken and no one will want to buy him so it's my job to put him down. I give him the whole spiel. "It'll be ok, death isn't really the end." all the same bullshit. He puts his hands together and starts praying to some god. There's a twinge inside me that tells me that maybe I've scared him enough. But the rest of me hardens against it. I know in my gut that this is just another thing I need to tie up if I'm gonna make it out of the country. I beat him in the head with the shotgun. He yells and I beat him more. He stops yelling and I shove the gun up under his chin and pull the trigger and it blows the top of his head out and it splatters all over the floor and the wall and everywhere else. The gun gets knocked clear out of my hand and flies back into my ankle and beats into it hard and leaves a really nasty feeling in it that makes me wonder if it's bruised, sprained, or broken.

I limp my way back out of the room and I toss the shotgun over onto his body. I grab a can of kerosine from the shop and I pour it all over the body and set it on fire with a match. It burns quickly. First the clothes are stripped off him to reveal a slightly charred body of a man between the ages of 60 and 65. He isn't in the best or the worst shape, he has that pear thing about him that older men get and his chest is very flat like he hasn't even thought of doing a push up since high school. The kerosine burns hot enough to get some of the skin burning but not all of it. The body is very fresh. I drag the desk over and I pour some kerosine on that and the fire spreads to it pretty greedily. I pour more kerosine onto Rufus and his mouth opens like he's trying to tell me to stop but nothing comes out. I pour a little more kerosine. The desk is really going. I push the other side of the desk over Rufus and hope the heat translates into the body drying out and eventually burning off into nothing more than bones and shattered skull material. His eyeball is on fire; it's sitting in a pool of blood and brain chunks above his head and the blood is mixed with the kerosine just enough that they're burning together a bit, like oil mixed with water. I throw another can of kerosine on the body but it knocks off and I decide I should just go light whatever Jeremy has prepared.

I go out the front door and Jeremy sprays me with a little gas on accident. He's been spraying gas all over the building. I tell him to spray some in the doorway, that the fumes need to build up for it to work right. The hose doesn't really go far enough but he manages to get some gas through the doorway and we decide to light it and the whole side of the building goes up in flames and the little part at the doorway and once it starts getting hotter it just makes these fireballs. There's these big hedges in front of the shop that are just fully ablaze, and soon enough I can hear a little explosion that I assume is the kerosene blowing in the back. We get in my truck and leave.

Jeremy's about 5'10". He's a ginger, I always wonder if they have freckles around their dicks. We start on the road and Jeremy starts setting in what happened.

"I cannot believe this, have you really killed my father?"

“Yeah, I mean I told you I was going to I don’t know why you thought I was lying.”
“I thought it was some kind of test, I thought you were just trying to get me to prove myself to you.”
“I don’t need you to prove yourself to me, I needed to know if you were gonna rat on me, and now I know you won’t because you just helped me kill your dad and burn down his store. You’re in on it now for sure.”
Jeremy rubs his eyes a little bit and tries his best to keep himself from crying but I can hear him being choked up. “There there, guy, it’s ok. You get used to it after a while. The thing about people is that they always act like you won’t just kill them. They never think that you’re the crazy fucker with the gun willing to put them down and burn them. They alway test you and then when you show your hand all of a sudden it’s wide eyes and begging for your life. Everyone’s an action movie hero but no one can pull the trigger.”
Jeremy doesn’t stop crying or look at me. I think about pulling over somewhere to kill him. I light a cigarette. All the bags are sitting in between us and it’s making it a little hard to shift gears. The highway is winding and carries and Jeremy doesn’t stop crying. I point out that “your father will become the ash that trees are grown in, he will be the air that we breathe and the ground we walk on.”
Jeremy pushes the steering wheel into the divider in the middle of the highway and the truck starts overturning. He lets go of the steering wheel and the truck skids on its side for a while before we come up to a hill the highway wants us to turn at. Instead the truck blows through the safety railing and tumbles and tumbles like a child playing at the park as chunks get blown off the sides and it rolls over itself on the side for what seems like forever until it stops with Jeremy’s body hanging limp and expectantly over me. I take a second to breathe and I light another cigarette. I suppose something like this might as well happen now.
I pull my way over Jeremy’s body and start climbing up and out of the truck. I can’t see the highway at all from where I am. The truck has landed in this sort of creek. I put my two feet on Jeremy’s shoulder and neck and look around and can’t see much. I lift myself slowly out of the cab and climb out and lower myself down onto the ground. The sun is starting to go down and it’s raining again. I take my sandwiches and cigarettes and coke and that’s about it other than the pistol. Time to walk.

The rain seemed to lift like a parting red sea as the wheels of passing cars kicked up a slurry of mud and water and oil onto my head. The ditch is overgrown with tall grass and rose bushes and as I’m stepping through it pulls at my clothes and tears holes in them. The sun has gone down and my hair is wet and I am cold. It starts raining harder.
Another pair of headlights comes up the highway. In my head I see a vision of the casinos in Kriemhild. I wave with my right arm and stick my thumb out with my left. The headlights belong to this little Japanese SUV with all wheel drive. It comes soaring down and doesn’t slow for me. A puddle

splashes against my chest. I flip him off. I take a cigarette out of the pack. The rain comes down hard. I try to light the cigarette but it gets wet and I throw it on the ground.

I'm walking and I feel like I shouldn't stop until I get somewhere new. A diner or a pit stop or somewhere I could call a cab or get a ride. I need to get north. I think I might settle in Neuberg but if I could get even further that would be good. I remember all the movies I would see about Kriemhild when I was young, the glitz and glam of the city as a thing of escape and debauchery in the cold west Yukon for the rich and poor alike, a beauty in the drab, a dot in the white. Neuberg is more like a trash heap is what I've heard. Big apartment blocks in the center of town and then the rich live on the outskirts, they drive in and all the poors walk, eating their white sausages and praying to a god that won't save them.

The rain picks up more and I need to find somewhere to stand. There's these street lights that don't give any kind of cover from the rain but maybe I can get a ride or something. I slip and struggle up this hill a bit more and this car comes just a foot away from taking me out with its headlights off. I climb my way up and run across the highway to get over to a streetlight. The blood is all cleansed from my person and I stand a helpless dying girl sticking her thumb out in the night. Headlights start coming up and I lean my body out a little over the highway. It's a semi truck. A true American worker ready to give me some saving. It's so cold that when I breathe out I can see big billowing clouds of water vapor coming out. I'm practicing my voice a little as the headlights pass me with about 6 tons of haul. He doesn't slow down. I wonder if he even saw me. I walk on the little concrete wall that heads up on the side of the mountain, I guess to protect the cliff from out of control maniacs. I feel a bit of remorse about the murders I've committed in the past 5 days.

I'm soaked through and through and I'm not even looking for headlights anymore and this little Hermann pulls up and it's got the window rolled down on the passenger side. I hop down off the wall and they put on their hazards and I run up.

It's dark as all hell in their car, but this woman's voice asks me, "where are you going," and I respond, "north, doesn't matter where," and I swear to god I could hear the smug grin grow on her face.

"Hop in," she told me, and I listened to her. I have a hard time denying pretty women what they ask for and I like her voice. I sit down on her seat and it's got a towel over it that starts picking up some of the water dripping off me. She rolls the window most of the way up and tosses me a towel and I start rubbing my head all over and drying out my hair. She has the radio on this station I've never heard before, they're playing this English/German indie dreampunk and the band that's on right now has like a bunch of horns playing like they used to be a ska band. I pull down the towel when I hear a lighter flick and she's lighting a cigarette, a Parliament, a 100, and I get a good look at her face in the light of the flame. She's got these sharp gothic features and small eyes and in the flame her eyes look sunken in and deep and like she hasn't slept in days. She puffs the cigarette and asks my name.

“Angel,” I tell her. I hate my voice, especially when I practice it. It barely sounds like me, it’s so high pitched and nasally like a barbie doll.
“Angel,” she repeats, “I’m Roni.”
“Roni,” I repeat. The upholstery in her car is all hand done, you can tell by looking at it. I want her to take me someplace safe and show me what it’s like to feel loved. Her hair is jet black and so is the interior fabric and the dash and the front of the car. She offers me a cigarette and I take it. She holds the lighter for me while she drives down the highway in fifth. The car starts getting hotter and I start drying out a bit. Her leather jacket hangs off her just so and it makes her look good and slim and peaks the white t-shirt she wears underneath just the right amount and I wonder how long she’s been driving.
“What got you on the road?”
“A lot of things. My roommate kicked me out. My friend fucked me over. What about you? Where are you from?”
“I’m from Reading. You know, California. Something about living at this latitude does something good for me I guess. I live in Neuberg now.”
“You like it there.”
“I do, yes.”
“That’s nice. I’ve never been.”
“Well, Angel, why don’t you come with me. You can even stay on the couch tonight on your way north.”
“North?”
“North, yeah, that’s where you’ve been going. Where are you going? Kriemhild?”
I never thought about it. I think to myself about the ways that it could be good to get to a big city. But in the north it would be cold, and I have money but I don’t have enough really to get a house. I’m gonna be homeless. Maybe I should go east, go to Cali or Arizona or something. Hell I bet I could slip past Junestadt in a month or two and head south to Meattown.
“Yeah, Kriemhild.”
“Kriemhild is fun, but if you think you’re gonna make anything, you’re mistaken. That town will chew you up and swallow you, take every cent that you have to your name and have you dancing for tips to make rent at your local motel. Happened to a couple friends of mine. Worse than Reno or Vegas or any of that. Kriemhild is a killer of men and women alike, and she will have her revenge in the second act.”
I ash my cigarette out the window and shutter again from the gust of cold. It must be 10 degrees or something. I think every 20th raindrop that hits the roof of the car is hail. I puff the cigarette for a minute or two and say, “maybe I’ll save the money and just go to dancing.”
“Yeah, say, do you got experience?”
“Experience what? Dancing?”

“Yeah, there’s clubs in Neuberg, you could get a paycheck or two before you keep going. A tall girl like you would get a lot in her g string.”
I never once thought about myself as hot enough to work as a dancer. The idea of getting paid for being hot sounds like a good ego boost. “Maybe. I’m tired. You got a shower at your place?”
“Yeah but no hot water. If I were you I’d just sleep naked and warm up from the covers.”
“Ok. How far off are we?”
“2 hours.”
“Ok, well maybe we could stop for some food or alcohol, I’ll pay.”
She’s beautiful and I want to buy her things. Also I haven’t eaten all day and I’ve been walking and I’m hungry, despite how I wish I could sit on this lack of calories for the day. Really, it seems like a pretty good deal, if you kill people and go on the run you actually lose a lot of weight. You start to really appreciate how much calories mean and how good food is and how you will really eat just about anything if you have to. I want a bucket of chicken all to myself to make up for not eating for the whole day. I sit back in the seat and feel in my pocket and pull out 60 and Roni’s eyes light up like I’m saving the world from aliens.

We pull up to this off looking gas station and she starts fueling the tank and I stay in the car.
“Don’t you want to come in and look around?”
“No, I don’t think I want to move too much.” I shiver in my seat like a little animal in a storm, I don’t think I had realized how much the cold had taken out of me. I sit here and she goes in and buys more cigarettes and 2 bottles of vodka and $20 worth of gas and a couple energy drinks and some chips. Then she pays with the cash I gave her and she comes back out and I think I was already through 2 more cigarettes. She saunters up to my window and I see her black leather pants swaying with every step and she’s got a big bag full of this shit and she says, “you know you could kill all of us smoking at a gas station?”
“It’ll be alright. See how wet it is. No fire when it’s wet.”
She gives me a bottle of vodka. I open it and pop out that little plastic fun stopper that they put at the top of the bottle. It smells like nail polish remover and it has the consistency at this temperature of cough syrup that’s been sitting in the freezer for a few hours. The bottle sits there in my hand and in a moment it is at my lips and I am gulping, the first alcohol I’ve had I think in a few days now. It burns my throat and wakes me up and calms me down and it seems like it does just about everything that it could ever hope to do just all at once. I drag my cigarette and she puts the nozzle away and gets in the car and takes off. We’re going down the road much faster now. Usually Hermann’s are 4 cylinder street cars with little more than a straight pipe to make them louder. Roni’s is modified. It has to have at least 6 cylinders, I wouldn’t be surprised if it has a v8. It rumbles like a storm down the road as she

accelerates to 85 on this bumpy mountain highway. She begins blasting the radio as they play a song she recognizes from her high school days.

“Courtney Love was heartbroken, this poor woman, and then the media comes in shoving cameras in her face, asking her all these questions about ‘did you kill him, there is evidence that we are being supplied that says he couldn’t have done it’ fuck off. She was a saint for not shooting the journalists, I tell you that much, after what they did with that fucking Vanity Fair slanderpiece. You know, when she was here in ‘92 I saw her, it was insane. I saw her in San Francisco and Reading and Neuberg and Seattle and Olympia and everywhere else. I was in love with her, really. And then they just do this to her. They chomp at the bit to tear apart a powerful woman.”

Watching her talk was a fun experience. She sat like a man in an action movie, her legs spread wide, seemingly all of her attention being simultaneously paid to smoking her cigarette, driving at high speeds, telling stories or complaining, and looking moody. In addition I think she was eyeing down my tits. It’s nice being around a masc, I haven’t had very many opportunities since I was in high school.

“And Kurt, you know he was transsexual. No shot “She Walks On Me” isn’t about their relationship and Courtney’s perception of Kurt as a woman and him seeing himself like that. I swear he was transsexual. Look at him crossdress on stage in videos and tell me I’m wrong. Have you got on the internet yet?”

“Not really.”

“I got dial up last year. It’s worth it, I think. Takes fucking forever to load sometimes but it works and it gives you all kinds of shit. Like videos, you can look at music videos from all the way back then still. Don’t need to catch it on MTV.

Well anyway. I’ve been watching some shit that people have uploaded on like, forums. Like, message boards, where you can see other people’s conversations. You know? Get it?”

“Uh, yeah I think so.”

“Well anyway, Kurt was a total transsexual girl, you look at her crossdressing, like wearing dresses on stage and dancing around, she looks so happy up there. Also there is just no shot Courtney Love isn’t a dyke. She just doesn’t realize that she really just wants transsexual women.”

I really don’t like when people talk about transexual women this much to me, especially when I don’t know them. I never know if they’re gonna make me another freak accident on the side of the road. Serves me right I guess. I am human filth. The scum of the earth. But Roni, she is perfect, she is everything that I wish I could be. Everything I wish I was born into, everything I wish I already was. Maybe I can just stick to her for long enough and become just like her.

“I don’t think too much about the Foo Fighters though. I don’t know. What do you think, Everlong, good or bad?”

“It’s alright.”

“Yeah, Dave Grohl is just alright. That’s kinda the problem, isn’t it.”
I get out my bag of coke.
“Oh shit! You got coke! Like a lot of fucking coke! Hold up, bitch, oh my god I can’t believe you didn’t tell me. I’ll pull over. Oh my god.”
I laugh at her for a little bit and put a little coke in my finger and snort it and take 3 or 4 more bumps and sniffle it and wash it all down with some vodka and crack open an energy drink. The energy drink tastes what I imagine goat piss would taste like and it’s a similar color. I try to finish it quick but about half way through I start feeling sick and try not to vomit.
The radio stops playing music for a minute and an alt-girl comes on saying some shit about how they have to play ads to pay the bills even though they hate capitalism so they start playing ads for 30 minutes solid.
I put my mind to work and start paying close attention to the ads. There’s one about me. It’s offering any information about a man named Robert Payton. I haven’t gone by that name in years and I pretty confidently pass as a woman, a tall woman but a woman, after this many years transitioning. My tits are remarkably fat.
One concern I’ve been having, actually, is where to get more estrogen. I haven’t injected since last tuesday and I can’t exactly go pick up my script under my name which they are searching for. Maybe I can get in another country and get some papers forged, have them slipped into the system and forgotten about. Get on with a different gender therapist, a different transition doctor, maybe get myself some kind of medication that actually works since drugs are easier to get out there. I don’t know, maybe I should go north, go to Kriemhild and let the power of the city wash through me call upon her for help in my time of need. But I have to keep in mind. It is cold. It is freezing in fact. And I drink my bottle and she goes a little faster and she puts her hand on my thigh.
“Are you a transsexual, Angel?”
“Uhh…”
“It’s ok if you are. I’ve never been with a transsexual.”
“It’s not too different.”
“Really,” god I know she’s gonna ask it. I drink more of the vodka and pull the cigarette like my life depends on it. “Do you still have it?”
I don’t respond right away. I’m hoping she won’t want to touch it. They always want to touch it.
“Like your dick?”
“No.”
“No?”
“No. I don’t.”
She takes her hand off my thigh. She wanted to touch it.

“Do you like giving head?”
“I’ll give you head, sure,” I tell her.
“Okay. We’ll do that then.”
I smoke the filter a bit and throw it out the window and light another Parliament and drink more vodka and I start feeling a bit better. At least now she won’t try to touch me, and I do like giving head. I wonder if she asks everyone that or if she could tell that about me.

The city lights peak from behind this hill that we’ve been driving up for the past 10 minutes and there it is. The sign says it all, “Welcome to Neuberg, The Edge of the world”.
“In the winter there’s this area north of town in the woods where it looks like there’s just a line where it’s raining on the south side and there’s all this snow just to the north. People come from all over to take pictures of it. The whole town is gearing up for tourist season. Mostly the hotels and that. There’s gonna be a lot of shows though. There’s one tomorrow night. You wanna come?”
“Yeah, that sounds good.”
She pulls off the highway not long after getting into town. She must live on the southside. I thought Neuberg would be smaller than Junestadt but the way it looks in the mountains really makes it seem like it’s a much busier and more important city. The lights downtown shine bright blues and yellows even late at night and they light up the whole skyline like a Christmas tree.
She lives in this expansive apartment structure, a big block from when this was Kanadener land and they had collective housing blocks. We pull into this parking structure and then walk into an elevator that takes us to the 11th floor of the block and we get there and walk for about 4 minutes to the opposite end of the block and there we are, the room. She opens the door and says “sorry for the mess” and we go in and there’s not much. It’s a studio, there’s a futon and a TV and a bathroom and she even has a stove and 2 sinks and a closet big enough just about to hold all her pants.
She offers me to lay on her futon. I do. She goes in the bathroom and brushes her teeth and tells me to take off my clothes and get under the covers. I do. She comes closer to me and pulls her pants off and she’s wearing these panties that are almost like briefs and she pulls them down to reveal this nice little tuft of brown/blonde hair that I doubt she has ever trimmed. She tells me to stick out my tongue and I do and she pulls her underwear all the way off and starts masturbating over my tongue while I lap at it like a baby bird eating the middle section of an earthworm that’s been chewed to mush. Finally I get some contact. She hasn’t showered in days. She recoils a bit from the feeling of my tongue and then places her hole over my tongue and I start to lick around every part of it until I’ve familiarized myself with it and it’s flexing itself open, making this clear hole appear, and in a nice round shape, where before the flesh had enclosed it mostly. I do this while she rubs her clit and moans. Her ass is in my face and she starts trailing her free hand over my body, starting with my tits, flicking my nipples and

squeezing them, feeling their perk and flirting with how puffy they are, before she begins chewing on my stomach and thighs. She starts rubbing my cock too, which I was unable to conceal. In between moans, she says “I knew you were lying, I knew you still had it.” It felt fine I guess. She rubs it not too dissimilar to the way I do when I masturbate, which is nice. It makes me wonder if she was lying when she said she hadn’t been with a transsexual before. Then she took her teeth off my thigh and started licking ever so gently right on that spot on it where it feels best and I’m sure she’s fucked transsexuals before. It feels insane, like she’s holding a vibrator to me, just so insanely overstimulating. She puts her clit over my mouth and I start sucking on it and licking it and she grinds down against my mouth and my tongue like she never had another option and I lick as fast as I can and she starts shaking over me and cums in my mouth. While she’s cumming she moans loud and takes her tongue off me but keeps rubbing the same spot as fast and hard as she can which makes me squirm under her ass as I moan and lick at her cunt, sticking my tongue as deep as I can in her hole. She keeps rubbing and she starts biting at my thighs again, as hard as she can it seems. It’s so intense that I can’t feel anything else when she’s biting me. She does this as she moans from me licking her and while she gropes at my tits and thighs and stomach. Then she goes back to licking at that spot but this time she’s putting a bit of suction and licking harder and faster and it all feels like too much and I can’t breathe with the ass in my face and I start panicking but she seems to just sense this and she lifts herself off and as soon as I get some extra air in me I just explode cum all over her face and hand and myself, this white-ish serum that collects in the crevasses of her bed and of my body. She doesn’t stop licking and I start screaming for what feels like hours, thrashing and bucking my hips both toward and away from her. At some point I guess she gets bored and she just gives it a little kiss and bites my thigh one more time before lying there.

I had never had sex like that in my life. The hardest I had cum had been from this guy I dated late in high school who had the biggest dick and would beat the hell out of my ass until he pumped load after load into me. I wonder what it would’ve felt like to had someone doing that to me when I was getting fucked. I put my arm over my face. I don’t know that anything will make me feel better. But I can think of a couple things.

I light a cigarette and I get out my bag of coke and I snort a couple bumps and puff the ciggie and so does Roni and we just lie there together for a while and smoke and take coke and after a while she starts telling me about some movies she’s been watching.

“Scanners is such an interesting story, and it makes me think that Cronenberg is 100% psychotic. Like he definitely has a mental disorder that gives you psychosis because how the fuck else am I supposed to interpret this story. Literally this guy has a condition that allows him to read people’s thoughts and also use his brain to kill people, which are two symptoms of schizophrenia, and then he gets taken by the government where basically they confirm that he is right and actually he is a special person for his hallucinations, which are real and not made up. And quite frankly, if Cronenberg isn’t psychotic and he

made that movie, I feel like that's a shitty thing that he did, because honestly that movie being made by someone who isn't psychotic is like them encouraging psychotic people to lean into their psychosis and believe it and shit, and that's fucked because that could really fuck someone up, you know?"
She plays with my hair and I lay on her chest and smell her and she's just amazing in this way that I don't know how to say other than just that it's something I can't believe I get to see. "I know what you're saying. You're really smart, you know."
"Thanks babe," she tells me, then she pulls my face toward hers and she kisses me and sticks her tongue in my mouth and it seems like everything leaves me and I'm just left in awe staring at her, wondering how it is that something like this happened to me, that I should be with such an amazing woman for even just a night. I just want this night to last forever and I know it won't and something about that breaks my heart. I need her in a way that I haven't felt since I was kicked out by my mom and dad, she feels like a warm fireplace in winter or a jacket keeping the rain off your back. Like the line between barbarism and society that I seem to always be toeing no matter how hard I try to get off it.
I think about the way that she looks and I fall asleep. I wish I had eaten something before I went to bed.

My head is pounding when I wake up, I feel like I'm in a movie and there's a shitty overlay that they put on in post that's trying to make it seem like I'm drunk. I wonder where Roni went. The shower isn't running. I get up off the futon which she never actually converted into a bed for some reason so it's still just upright with me barely not falling off it all night. I stumble a bit and run to the bathroom and vomit about ¾-⅘ into the toilet with the rest going on the seat or getting splashed onto the floor or the wall of the shower that sits next to the toilet. I see the brand of the toilet while I'm bent over there, an old state owned Kanadener brand called Kalimeko, who made all kinds of shit from plumbing to electronics and computers and missile guidance systems to inflatable kids toys. Rarely do you see a company with such versatility, but they owned almost half of the factories in Kanaden at one point so I suppose it tracks. I wipe it up as good as I can in my state and splash water on my face in the sink and it wakes me up a little bit but not really as much as I would want it to. I swish some water in my mouth and there's a little bit of mouthwash in a bottle that I use. My vomit tasted like vodka and acid. So like the vodka I drank pretty much. It just comes back out, gotta remember that about eating. I want coffee.
I go into the kitchen and there's a little 4 cup coffee machine and I put some coffee in it and turn it on with the water and make coffee and drink it greedily like water. There's a note on the counter.
"I went to work… help yourself to what you need (within reason ha ha) I'll be back about 5:30. We can go to that show tonight. You should get some new clothes… I noticed you didn't pack any. Also… I hope you don't mind… I took a little of your coke. There's cereal and a little milk.

-Roni”

I drink the coffee. I wonder how much coke she meant. Not that much, I imagine, I don’t even have that much really, and how much can you use at work. I opened the blinds on this dirty window that must’ve been 40 or 50 years old and I peer down at the street and I see so many people walking on the sidewalk, she lives in the middle of this bustling city center, and from this high you can see almost everything. And for a moment I can feel it in my heart, this oneness. I’ve made it. I finally have that real feeling of fulfilment. I can’t remember the last time I even knew that this was something I was looking for.

I look through her cds for a little bit and it’s surprising how much I haven’t heard of. Maybe these are local bands from north Cassandria. I pick one out, “Engel weinen”, and put it on. It’s this dirty grunge, sounds like it was recorded live illegally from the back of a busy punk club. There’s a bounciness to it and a bit of this feeling of death and mourning in the notes that were played, but I don’t understand most of it because it’s in German. One of the songs is named after an atrocity the US army did back in 1923 when Kanaden became an independent communist country. The military attempted to frame the regime as being especially brutal and violent, and so they mimicked communist death squads, entering towns and dismantling them after declaring their political interests. The population didn’t fall for it. There were mass deportations of American immigrants back south and there was generally bad blood between the two nations as a result, despite the communists in the north never directly provoking or retaliating as a part of this cold conflict.

Neuberg is covered in snow. It must’ve come in overnight because I feel like I would’ve remembered it if I had seen any in the past couple days. The clock says it’s the 3rd. Time flies I guess. It also, conveniently, states the time, which I’m pretty sure says 11:35 but my eyes can’t seem to focus well enough on it. I light a cigarette and it’s the last one in the pack and I start looking around to see if she had any. I can’t even remember her name all of a sudden. I spend some time trying to figure out what it is and it comes back to me as Roni. She doesn’t have any ciggies sitting around the house and I’m a little disappointed. I put on the clothes that she dried out for me last night and one of her jackets over it all and I get myself out the door and walk to the elevator to be taken down to street level.

Texas has this feeling to it in my head, I’ve never been but in TV and movies and things like that there’s this certain feeling, or like a color of light or something, that just screams “Texas” to me. Like talking about Dallas like it’s the most important thing in the world, or driving a classic pickup truck with people sitting in the back, or driving on these highways that seem to go nowhere from nowhere. I step out into Neuberg and take a bump and I start walking to find a corner store and everything just screams “Texas”. The clouds have this weight that doesn’t seem real, like they’re shooting across the sky at a million miles per hour but also just sitting there staring at you, letting you get a good look at every fold and shadow they got. There’s something almost intimidating about it, like an unshaking look

into your father's eyes, they've never been so disappointed in you. Neuberg makes my head light and the more I say the name of the city in my head the more idiotic it sounds.

There's a store on the corner by a road called Bart and another goes by Main Drive. It's got a gas station attached to it selling fuel from Texas and OPEC and the British and all of it was mixed together and sold as "regular unleaded gasoline" with about 17% ethanol. The roads were covered in these loud stinking cars that made big puffs of black smoke. There were some that looked like my old car in Junestadt but they were just so much louder. In the mountains, I guess, people get bigger engines.

The corner store has Parchment 100s so I get a carton and a pack so I don't have to open up the carton on the walk back and carry around an opened carton of cigarettes like I'm just begging someone to knock the box out of my hands and take as many packs as they can get before I scare them off. I think about this as I light a second one with the cherry of the first to save my lighter. I also got a Coke.

I'm smoking my cigarette and drinking my Coke and I'm going down the street and there's this feeling sitting in the back of my head that says I'm being followed and I get a little paranoid. I try to stay calm, going into the first store I can. It's a boutique. They sell beauty products from all over and for all over. They even have hair bleach and dye, and they do dye jobs if you want to pay them for it. I figure it'll be more punk rock to do it myself. I steal a jar of pink hair dye and I buy a box of bleaching solution.

"That'll be 6," the cashier told me.

I pull out 100 and she says, "We don't take bills that large."

I start rooting around in my little envelope of money that I got from Mark and I see a 10 that's got some blood stuck to it and I scrape it off a little with my nail before handing it over to her. She doesn't bat an eye and I have the bleach and I drink my Coke and I smoke another cigarette on the walk back to Roni's.

Roni is back at the apartment already and I have a moment where I wonder if she was just hiding somewhere in the apartment and waiting for me to leave so she could get ready without me there. It seems a little silly after I think it. She has coffee on the stove boiling away and I sit down with my Coke and finish it so quick as I can so I can get on to what she's doing. She says at work they were overstaffed, she works as a receptionist so "overstaffed" either means no one is calling or they literally have too many receptionists to be able to hear each other clearly when they gossip. She doesn't look like a receptionist.

I take my purse in my hands and take out the cocaine and a cigarette and give myself a bump and offer her one. I light the cigarette and rub the raised lettering where it says "Parchment" in blue bold script. She takes the bump out of my hand as I close my lighter up with my thumb.

"What kind of company is it?"

"We make and distribute opiates in the eastern US. Our department is in charge of making sure that people don't sue us about it."

“Why would they sue you?”
“Don’t worry about that,” she says, and I stare her up and down for a minute until I decide it isn’t worth the push.
I sit on her couch, it’s this carpet green number that doesn’t seem to like you sitting on it unless you’re wearing thick pants that won’t let the wiry little bits of whatever the hell pry its way into your skin and make you wish you’d’a dressed different.

Something about Roni changes about 5 or 6, she becomes the woman who picked me up and ate me out. She changes out of her stuffy suit dress and she puts on all black outfits that scream at you the entire time that you look at her. When I see her like that, there’s this feeling in my chest like I can’t breathe and then I make myself look away because I don’t know what else to do.
I look at her and she’s applying her mascara, a shadow of grey and black eyeshadow to both of her eyes, and she’s got this matte black lipstick that makes her look like a doll on the shelf wearing the coolest outfit you’ve ever seen. I try and follow suit, I’ve got some clothes she helped me pick out at a couple thrift stores that sits a few minute’s walk down the street. She knows about a punk show happening tonight downtown, says she’ll drive me. I start painting white all over my face and when I’m done I put little black hearts around my eyes with face paint so I can be a mime. I always like to make up an excuse to not use my voice when I go out. Keeps me from using cigarette voice too much and that helps me pass I think.
I get back in her car and she lights a big nasty joint. She raises her eyebrows at me like she’s been waiting all day to light it. It takes her a second to get the full end of it cherry, and while she’s doing that I light another Parchment, roll down the window and blow the smoke out, breathing the night air and feeling it against my face. I feel her grab my arm and before I can look over she’s putting the joint out on my arm. I struggle away from the joint and I see my skin getting red and hot under the cherry before she puts it back down closer to my neck. I yelp and whine and I can hardly breathe because the pain is so much.
“You sound so good when you’re hurt,” she says before climbing out of the driver’s seat and over on top of me, straddling me and pulling down my top and putting her knee on my hand and kissing me while I did my best to not ash my cigarette in her car. She puts her tongue in my mouth and presses the cherry down on my left tit about an inch off from the nipple. She puts her other hand down on my arm and leans her weight against it and I can’t move, and she twists it and all I can do is flick the ash off my cigarette and put it up on her arm. She pulls her tongue out of my mouth and moans into it. I feel her stop twisting. The joint is dead out anyway. She grinds her cunt up against my thigh and my crotch and she kisses my neck a few times until she seems like she gets bored and then she starts chewing like she’s trying to eat me and I moan and groan and try to get her off a bit but she squeezes one of my tits

with a hand I didn't realize wasn't holding my wrist anymore and ground down harder on my thigh. She does this until she cums. It doesn't take long.

She looks down at me panting. I convulse in pain and lean over to the window and put my head against it and put my hands over the bruises on my neck and the burns on my tits and I shudder and gasp and try to calm myself down and I don't know what to think about all this really because I don't know if I liked it or not. It hurt but she was over me, she had the power and she was making what she wanted happen and I could see that and I liked it and I liked that she was doing it to me. But it hurt my god it hurt.

She wipes a line of blood on her cheek and it paints it with this perfect smear that goes up to her cheekbone and stops perfectly just there, tapering off. I look at my hand and my neck is bleeding. "Ha, little bloodbag."

"Hu, hu, hu, can I, hu, can I have a bandage?"

"Yeah, sure, whatever," Roni looks like she's got hearts in her eyes and I wonder if she can see any in mine. She gets off me and opens her first aid kit and puts some gauze on my neck. Then she wraps the bandage around and around and around and she asks how it feels every once in a while but i can never tell if she means the cut or the wrap. Then we go to the show.

The show is in this parking lot outside a tattoo parlor at a strip mall near the edge of town. Next door there's a little barber shop and a restaurant that looks like it exclusively sells to old people based on how much they advertise their senior discount.

The first band sucks but the second is a lot better. They're called "Cock Sneeze" and they sing songs about sex and it sounds like a nail being repeatedly nailed into someone's thigh so as to make patterns, kinda like a tattoo. Good punk rock. They have a drummer that manages to dance while he drums, he bounces in his chair and his mohawk is so large and colorful. Roni jumps so beautifully and I get this puff of wind off her every time that makes me feel like she's putting out these amazing little bits of energy toward me and it's making me feel like I'm there with her and there's something amazing about that and I touch my neck and it hurts and I look at her and now I understand why she bit me. She needed to taste me. She needed a piece of me inside her, a bit of my blood, my skin, sinew. I want to let her do it again. I hope I get the chance.

The drummer starts playing this beat that goes so fast and so hard and the whole crowd starts jumping to it, something about it just gives everyone around this drive to try and fly and I get hit by a guy on accident from behind and I try not to make a big deal about it but it hurts and I'm mad so I move a little away and Roni comes with me.

The show is free but there's a little booth they have with joints and beers and loose cigarettes. It was 1 a beer so I bought us 2 and we drank them and it was 2 for a joint and Roni likes joints so I bought her

one of those. Altogether it cost me 4 and we were drinking and smoking by the pit of a pretty little midnight punk show here in the fine mountain city of Newberg or whatever the shit.
The joint tastes like shit and it makes me regret hitting it. It's 95% tobacco but still tastes like ass and I think it has something to do with the type of tobacco they mix it with. I light a Parchment and it takes most of that shitty taste out of my mouth. It seems like I should be thinking about something more important but I just want to stand there and drink and smoke my cigarette and look at Roni. I want to look at her hair and think about how beautiful she is and how much I could be next to her. I want her to look at me like a piece of meat. I want to be put on a spit and roasted. I want chunks of me torn off in these big ugly massacres, with dull teeth or sharp claws. I want to be bruised and broken and crying.
I fall on the ground and spill some of my beer on myself. I have this picture in my head of my dad standing over me and grabbing my shirt by the collar. I didn't do my homework and he knew that and I was lying and he thought he could be an asshole to me to get me to admit to it and when it didn't work he got angrier and angrier until he was standing there in his fucking briefs, his fucking *panties* screaming at me like he had something to say. I picked up the phone off the wall and said I was gonna call 911 but on the way to me dialing he said "why don't you call your mom too?" and I said "sure thing sounds like a good idea" and that's when he hit the phone out of my hand and grabbed my by the shirt and just started choking me and screaming and he pushed me to the ground and spat all over my face and I felt like I would never be able to get away from him. But eventually he stopped and I was able to sit up and in the morning I went to my mom's. That went well until I came out. I smoke my Parchment. It tastes like a good cup of coffee with a little piece of chocolate in it. I have no clue who'd smoke a different cigarette. I finish my beer on the floor and then I stand up. Roni didn't notice I fell. I don't remember when last I ate. I touch my neck and it hurts.

I smoke my cigarette and in my head I can hear that old song "The House of the Rising Sun". I know it's not the Rolling Stones but I always wanna say that they're the ones who wrote it. The second band finishes and they take a short break before the final show, the headliner, sort of, if you can have a headliner for a free parking lot punk show. We take a little walk around and I give her one of my cigarettes so we don't have to buy one from the stand and we look up at the stars. The city is just big enough downtown that you can't see anything in that direction but the other way there was all this shit, the clarity of being so close to the stars in the first place, to be one with the sky.

I touch my neck and I wince from it.

"Is your neck feeling ok?"

"It's ok."

"Was that all too much for you?"

"I'm not used to it," I tell her, "but I liked it."

She smiles at me and takes my hand in hers and we smoke our cigarettes.

“What do you think about Neuberg, since you got here?”

“I like it. I haven’t seen much but I like a city.”

“Any city? You ever live in a city?”

“I lived in another city before this. I might not stay here too long, you know.”

“You don’t seem the type. But I tell you what. I need a winter. You wanna be my winter? You can stay at mine, get a job in town, I’ll help you if you need paperwork, if you got kicked out or something. I need someone who’ll be there when it’s freezing and I’d rather die than go back in the cold.”

I look at her. Too many things cross my mind all at once. I can’t say any of them. “I’ll think about it, just gimme a day. I like you. I might it’s just…”

“It’s ok. That’s fine. Just tell me if you’re leaving.”

She puts her arm around me. I don’t know if I realized how strong she was before that moment. She lifts up my shirt and puts the rest of her cigarette out on my stomach while her other hand covers my mouth. I gasp and groan and moan and it hurts even worse than anything she did to me up until that point but I cum in my pants from it.

I don’t pay attention to the last band. I stand there holding Roni’s arm and leaning on her while she jumps around. I like watching her, it’s a good time, but I wish I could sleep. I didn’t know how much pain takes all the energy out of you. I feel like a fully eaten meal.

I pass out in the car on the drive home.

I wake up and I’m still in her car. It’s cold. She left me here. There’s an inch of snow on the car. I’m glad I had a jacket on.

I stand up and some of the snow from the top of the car goes on the top of my head and I start walking my way over to her apartment. I’m shivering and shaking and shuffling and mumbling so to try and calm myself and warm myself up I try and light a cigarette but my lighter is way too fucking cold and it just won’t spark so I jump a few times to get my blood up and start asking people if they have a light as they walk past but many of them haven’t gotten their winter wardrobes out yet and they’re freezing like me and they say no just to be able to keep walking a little faster. I find a matchbook in my pocket and I light one of the matches and the flame touches my cigarette and we’re on. The cold doesn’t even have a chance, and who told it it did?

I make it up to Roni’s apartment. I knock on the door and she lets me in. She’s rubbing her eyes, she just woke up.

“I gotta look for my keys, can you help me?”

“Yeah, sure, what places do you usually toss them?”

“I put them in the sink sometimes. In the bed, by the stove, in the couch, sometimes I put it places because it gets lost there easy and I don’t want to drive around drunk.”
I start moving around, the bathroom, the kitchen, “you put it by the stove?”
“Keeps ‘em warm.”
I look under the couch and there they are, sitting flush right up by the leg in the corner. I reach one of my skinny lanky extra long arms all the way back there and swipe them and they come shooting out and hit Roni in the foot.
“Ow, hey be careful numbskull.”
She picks her keys up and takes her shirt off and puts on a bra and puts on another shirt. A uniform for one of these local coffee shops that are ubiquitous with the north.
“Another day at Pope Schroeter. Maybe today I can get a smoke break before the rains come in.”
“You guys get rains here? I haven’t noticed them.”
“Oh yeah, they’re bad.”
“Well what do you want to do later?”
“Don’t know.”
“When will you be back?”
“Don’t know.”
“Ok.”
“See you later!”
And she’s gone. Her ability to slip into her shoes and just get out the door. Amazing to me. I don’t have any plans or anything to do around the house. Things are clean. I don’t want to redecorate because it’s really hardly my place and I don’t even pay rent yet and I haven’t decided if I want to stay.
I feel like a neglected housewife but I have freezing nipples that I hold my hands over and they just get worse. I lie down on her bed and for a second I feel a little better and I think about how I can sleep in for a while since I don’t have to work so I try and sleep. The window is open and I roll over but it’s still to bright and I pull the blanket over me and it’s cold and it’s still too bright so I put an arm over my face and it’s cold and I can’t lay like this so I roll over but now I’m facing the window so I roll on my stomach and I turn my head but she’s got these hard pillows that don’t let your neck sit right on them so when I lay there it hurts my jaw and I can tell it’s putting pressure on one of the only joints in my body that I every broke so I roll back onto my side and I just lie there and I try and get some sleep but instead I’m stuck there getting a little upset about the fact that she is just leaving me alone when she knows that I don’t know anyone in town at all and that I didn’t even get introduced to anyone at the place she took me because she didn’t think I would want to go to a place where she knew someone to introduce me to so I can get to know someone and I just get up out of bed. I grab the key off the kitchen counter, the

one sitting next to the note that I saw before about how I can use it to get in and out and I take off to the street.

There's this homeless guy selling water bottles with something or other about how his life is falling apart his wife left him he's upset. I buy a water bottle. I give him 5 for it. He didn't want that much but I didn't want to ask him for change. He takes the money. I keep going. There's a restaurant. I need to get out of the cold. I go in the front door.

It's a bistro. Fancy place. I'm underdressed. That's my first thought. Then I look closer. I see weird button ups on children. It's Sunday after church. This is little italian joint. I smell pizza. I ask for a table and they sit me near the bar.

I order a Coke first. It's sweet and cold and I wish it had real cocaine in it and I wonder to myself why I never thought of putting coke in Coke before. I put my purse in my lap and I take out a little coke and I put it in my Coke and I stir it. It makes the soda fizz a little more at first and then it fizzes a little less actually. They ask me what I want to eat and I get 2 slices of pizza and a plate of spaghetti. Altogether they charge me 8.06 and I try and pay in exact change. I watch the room while I eat. There's a family celebrating something big it seems like and I watch as they eat pie after pie of this overcheesed Cassandrian mountain pie that was probably designed to not get cold even if you buried it in snow for 2 days. There's no windows in the whole place, the people just sit in their chairs and look at each other, except for at the bar. I wish I still had a fake ID, used to be I could get into most places in Junestadt without much hassle from anyone. I look older on account of my cigarette use.

I sit alone and spin my spaghetti up on my fork like you're supposed to and it twirls up like it's supposed to and I take it up and put it in my mouth. When I was 16 I started smoking the day that my parents kicked me out. I don't remember what year it was exactly but I remember that I was a young, scared little girl and I needed help and I went to Mark. I would always go to Mark for help. I went to him for help when I came out as gay, I went to him when I needed a job, I lives with him for some 5 or 6 years. I did everything with and for and because of that man and all I can say is that I wish I had cut him out of my life sooner so I wouldn't have had the heartbreak of going on the run with him and seeing him at his worse and all that. Now I sip my Coke and make myself start eating through the two slices of pizza that are put in front of me, now that I've given the cheese about 10 whole minutes to start cooking down.

The food is ok. I look out toward the store and there's 3 types that I can really see running this town. The first is the ranchers. There's a good few tables of them, they sit with their families mostly but some of them populate the bar. The second I guess would be the townies. They dress in this mixture of Kurt Cobain and mall goth that makes you wonder if they really came up with that or if they just saw it on the latest New York Fashion walk. Either way they do still eat pizza. The last are the suburbanites.

They look the same, talk the same, are the same. The same cliques we had back in Junestadt, except I guess here they don't like to grow out of highschool.

I can't bring myself to eat the second slice at all, I didn't even finish the first. Instead I leave money on the table and go in the bathroom to use some cocaine. I go into one of the stalls in the women's room and it's about as bad as you think it would be: there's a loaded diaper laying sloshed on the floor, there's a shitty little toilet that wouldn't flush a ping pong ball much less a turd, and there's a window that's always open because people smoke in here. I light a cigarette. There's a little mirror by the stall door and there's a lot scratched into it from over the years but I kinda look in it and see myself sitting there and there's this moment where I feel myself slowing down and letting myself feel beautiful. It's been about 4 years since I started HRT and I really got off pretty scot free for it. I haven't taken my hormones but the laser treatment makes sure that no hairs grow on my body and I look at myself in this little mirror and for a moment I can see a little beauty in my face, in the normality and realness that I exude, even as a delinquent drug addict. I take a bump and feel good about myself for once.

As I make my way further down the road I take a turn on a street with a park and a liquor store. I go into the liquor store and buy myself a beer and open it outside so they don't kick me out and go to the park across the street. The park is nice, if full of litter. I drink my beer and light a cigarette and these townies come up to me.

"Who are you?"

"Who wants to know?"

"I do." It's some college kid. He's lighting a Parchment. He's got shaggy blonde hair and a white and green striped long sleeve t-shirt. He looks like he's been on a bender. He's here with a woman. I look up at him and turn down my sunglasses a bit.

"Angel," I tell him.

"Like from god?"

"Yeah," I say, "like from god."

I drink from my beer and smoke my cigarette and they ask if I have any money and they'll go get a bottle of bourbon. I say fine and give them 20 and they come back with a couple pints of some nice bourbon, the kind that you drink and say "yeah" even though it tastes like the piss combination of corn and rotten apples. The core of America, the heartlands truly.

The two townies sit next to me under this tree and they ask "where are you from?" and I break out these lies.

"I'm from a place in New Mexico. Over in the mainland, you know. This little town called Socorro. Well, my dad was a cop, he didn't appreciate that I was trans, so it was out to the desert for me, walking like Jesus north toward Albuquerque for 100 something miles along I-25. Get to Albuquerque and what do you know, nobody cares about a homeless tranny. And since I don't have any family left

and I don't have a job and all that, since I don't have anything tying me down, I figured I would just start travelling around. Came here on my way to Bismuth, I just came from Von Dunkel, up north, that little cop town in Kanaden."

Americans don't know shit about geography so if you know more than all the state capitals they'll believe you're well traveled or from anywhere that isn't where they're from. I never left Junestadt except for a little excursion to Bismuth.

I finish my beer and throw the can away because I just can't find it in my heart to continue contributing to the litter in this park. I imagine someone's kid coming up and finding my bottle. The townies, their names are Steve and Samantha. They're dating, they've been dating since highschool. Samantha can't take her eyes off my tits and I try to pretend I don't notice. I don't think she's gonna be able to stay with him for much longer. She seems like she's sick of him and the way that he is and she really didn't think that she'd have to stay with him after high school. They dress in all black and makeup like every other townie. Like the whole town is just one big mall for them to rat around in.

Steve takes a little walk and it's just me and Sam and she's telling me about all the different bars in town. I tell her I can't go, I'm turning 20 in January. She says they don't card and if they do I can just wash the x's off the backs of my hands and get a drink anyway, that's what she used to do she says. I've never been a rat of any type in my life before, no mall rat, street rat, or show rat experience in my life, but this town it seems like it's either that or ranching and it simply isn't the time of year to be out smoking reds and getting some work done in the fields. Not to mention I'm scared of horses.

Steve is a weird looking guy. He kinda looks like a thumb. His hair doesn't go quite the way that you think it should, it's cropped off in this way that just kinda pisses you off when you look at it. Sam isn't really much to look at either but at least she knows how to dress herself. She wears this dark gothic makeup like she's one of the girls that works at alt stores at the mall, real kinky type shit.

I try my best to get my eyes of Steve's fucked up forehead but his girlfriend isn't talking to me and she just keeps staring at him as he walks around the park. I wonder if this is what these people do every fucking day, just sit around this trash covered park and drink and stare at each other while they walk around and act like idiots in front of the whole town. I watch them doing this for a second and it dawns on me that I'm doing the same thing. I wonder if these people are on the run too.

I call over Steve. At the very least he looks like he knows about the local scene. I ask him, "what shows are going on tonight?"

"No shows," he says, "but it's fight night over at Jermy's and drinks are half off. If you don't have an ID you can just wash the x's off your hands. Or just speak German with the door guy, he's cool, he's a total Kanadener."

"Where do I find it?"

"Over off 12th and Main. It's starting up around 7 and it'll run all night. It's 2 to fight."

I have a moment of shock and awe. “Excuse me?”
“To fight.”
“Yeah, ok.”
I can’t remember the last time I fought someone. I think it was my dad. He tackled me down on a bed and I put my knees between us and he spat all over my face and made himself big and red and squelching, his stomach hanging over his cock and balls like a potbelly pig with a more normal looking dick. I grabbed his face and I turned it away from me and yelled something about him being old and weak and that I was going to kill him if he let me up and I swung and I missed and he grabbed my arm and jabbed me a couple times in the ribs and I got the wind knocked out of me. I was 13. I stopped living with him after that.
I say goodbye to Sam and Steve and say I’ll see them at fight night and I wonder if I’m going to fight. It’s only 2 and I could get out some frustration. But there’s a bit of fear, I must say, because I wonder if I want to get in that ring so I can do too much. I wonder if I’m the kind of person that can be trusted to hold myself back in a ring. This isn’t a place to go overboard, I can tell that much.

Me and Roni get there about 8 and it’s packed. This place is the only bar that’s packed that night, actually, since it’s a tuesday night and I have never seen people get excited to get off work on a tuesday and go get the shit kicked out of them. Some people were born to be covered in blood. Outside there’s some people gambling, they’re playing the cup game, which is funny because it’s the one game that is like well known for being a scam. I couldn’t get people to play that with me in high school because I would win every time and they knew why. It’s a good little racket. I guess people will bet on anything up north.
I go in and there’s a band playing, some kind of metal/rock that I would get in trouble if I tried to identify it as one or the other. In fact I think it’s a Korn cover band. In the corner there’s a shrine to someone who died. Their name isn’t on there. I think they died of aids.
I stand in this line that I think is to sign up to fight and I get out a double bill and when I get to the front of this line there’s this girl there taking people’s money and she asks me, “Wie alt bist du, liebens?” She’s asking because I have the x’s on my hands. I guess it’s either drink or fight tonight.
>>19,<< I tell her in German.
>>Schoen,<< she writes something on my hand in red, >>hast du ein Partner?<<
>>Nein, ich bin neu in die Stadt.<<
>>Oh!” She says and rubs my hand, “Woher kommst du?<<
>>Houston.<<
>>Schoen! Du sprichst gut Deutsch. Wie heißt du?<<
>>Angel Vermouth,<< I tell her. She writes it down on a sheet of paper.

>>Ok, Engel, geh und sitzt, bis später!<<
I smile and go to sit down. I haven't spoke German since I graduated and she said I was good at it. I go to find Roni and she's sitting at the bar and I can't sit at the bar with x's on my hands.
"I'm gonna sit at a table," I tell her.
"Ok!" She says back. Then I walk off and find a table to sit at on the other side of the ring.
The room is huge and there's a stage on the north wall. The band is playing loudly and getting everyone hyped up and then the announcer comes out and she's the same one that just took money from me and she says "Angel Vermouth und Lily Maesterbild". I have this moment where I'm too scared to do anything and then something takes over in me and the social pressure builds up and I need to get myself together and get up there because there's a woman who has about 2 inches on me and she's eyeing me up like a piece of meat. I go out there and the woman looks down at me and I just get myself ready the way that makes the most sense to me, which in this case is getting a little low and spreading my arms to prepare for what I assume will be wrestling. She looks strong.
The announcer says something and a bell is hit and Lily comes straight at me. She puts her arm around my head and she squeezes it and I can't move or she'll kill me I'm pretty sure so I do what I can to flex the muscles in my neck and I start using my arms to pry her arms apart to free my head from this lock she has me in. I act more patient than I really am and I manage to pull her hands apart with mine and grab her wrist and put her arm behind her back. Then I slam her down on the ground and I start wrenching at her, straddling her waist. I look at her under me, fighting back, and there's this little feeling inside me that I should be kissing her passionately. While I'm thinking about that, she manages to get her arm in this spot on my back so when she pulls down she can quickly flip me over and get on top of me. She grabs at my wrists to pin me while I thrust my hips up into her ass and try to get her off me. I manage to get a little bit of an advantage and she topples over panting. The two of us are too tired to keep fighting so we take this moment. I get back up to my feet and take a small walk around the ring like a dying predator circling it's opponent before finally collapsing from bloodloss. This walk is ended abruptly when I am tackled by Lily, who smells like sweat and blood and dirt and she pins me down and presses on the bruises all over my neck that are big and swollen and obvious. It feels like a really good stretch in my neck and I start moaning so she bites me while the announcer counts down from 10 and I just start to submit to her.
This has to be a gay bar. There were tips littering the ring when we got up. We pick them all up and split them up evenly between us and I see Sam and Steve there watching me and they say "good fight, slugger, but next time you gotta win."
I plop myself down at the open spot on their table. "I don't know how I could. Fuckin me, that hurt. Was it hot?"
"It was hot," Sam says. "You should come again next week."

“Yeah, maybe,” I tell her.
“Can I get you a drink?” Steve asks me.
“Moscow mule,” I put my head down on the table and heave these breaths in and out of me like someone who’s just run a marathon. I kinda feel like I’ve run a marathon, now that I mention it.
Roni comes to the table and puts her hands on my shoulders and looks at me. “Who are your friends?” she asks.
“Samantha and Steve, met them at a park today.”
Roni makes these eyes at Sam that could be fuck me or fight me eyes. I don’t understand how she could possibly be possessive over me when she only met me 2 or 3 days ago. I look forward and Steve comes back with the mule for me and I start drinking it. Roni goes to get me water once Steve and Sam are making out at the other side of the table. It always disgusts me to see two straights fighting with their tongues. What a waste of a good queer.
The mule is strong with vodka and it tastes like shit, it’s that kind of vodka they sell in sizes that aren’t legal to sell in the US, like 4 or 5 liters. Really thick, really strong, really having a hard time choking it down type of liquor. The kind you rub on the outside of your boat to get the barnacles off. Anyway I drink greedily and the mule starts to work its magic and I start to feel like myself again. “Steve,” I say, “thank you Steve, this is exactly what I needed.”
“Glad I could be of service,” he says, tipping an invisible hat. Townies are such fuckin dorks.
I watch some of the other fights but the ones where it’s two men just don’t interest me at all. The girl, Lily, she comes over and sits at the table I’m at and she asks if I want to make out. I tell her sure and we start kissing. Nothing serious, I’m still feeling it in my chest like I’ve just drank a fifth of vodka and driven down the freeway at 115 for 45 miles. She puts her tongue in my mouth and I could never understand why someone would want that from a stranger. I need normal kisses first, actually, because otherwise how am I supposed to know what your breath tastes like beforehand. Besides, I need to see you a few times to make sure those are pimples and not herpes. Roni grabs onto my thigh and watches and Lily lifts my chin and puts her hand over my nose and sticks a finger down my throat. I guess I’m just her bitch for tonight. Might as well put me on a leash and name me Bessie. I gag on the finger and look away and vomit in my mouth a little bit and she pulls me back and uncovers my nose. Then she asks me what I’m drinking. I tell her a margarita and she goes to get me one. I don’t know how any of this happened or if she is actually interested in me. Roni pulls at my arm and kisses my neck and gets up close to my ear and whispers “that was fucking hot.”
“Yeah?”
“Yeah. You should invite her to my place.”
“Ok,” I say, panting. She takes my hand and squeezes it.

I look over and there's two girls there wrestling and they're wearing cowboy clothes and one of them is even wearing makeup to make her look more masculine. I wonder how serious everyone else takes this. Maybe I did it wrong. But I still lost. I tried so hard. How have I killed all these people but I can't stop these women from pinning me down?

Lily comes back with a margarita and I finish the mule as fast as I can and take a sip of the marg and it's so fucking strong I don't know how people come here. I can barely sip the full plastic cup of sour mix and tequila. "How do you like it," she asks me.

"It's good."

"I told them it was for the loser."

At least it washes the taste of vomit out of my mouth.

"Is that your real name?"

"Huh?"

"Angel Vermouth. They said your name was Angel Vermouth. The announcer, when I asked her. Is that your real name?"

"No."

"When did you change it?"

"I don't want to tell you that."

She looks at me for a second, her eyes wide and thinking. "That's ok. It's like, a really fake name though."

"Doesn't really matter, does it? It's like a stage name. I just use it all the time."

She presses her lips together and looks up toward the ceiling. The colors of the lights all beat against her face and she manages to look more beautiful than before.

"You ever had a three way?"

I wake up with my ass loose and still a little sticky with lube or cum or whatever the hell. Filthy sheets covered in jizzm litter the bed and make it feel like a bag of potato chips was spread out over the entirety of it before we laid down. I see Lily's arm wrapped around me and when I move I realize her cock is still inside me. I ease myself off it painfully and slowly, the muscles being accustomed now to the size and shape of it and the lube not being quite enough any more. It feels like I'm shitting as it flops out of me before getting hard again. I don't remember anything from last night but I'm covered in bruises. I'm wondering how strong of a person I really am if this is all I can handle. I try my best to be quiet. There's Roni. We're in her apartment. I'm fucking starving. I get my money and I get my drugs and I get my clothes on and I get out of there, closing the door a little too hard on my way out I think.

There's a whole lot to do in this town if you're fine with doing nothing. I see a thing about a farmer's market last meeting of the year until April and decide to walk to the park they're heading it up at. It's a nice big park with these winding trails, it sits on two hills and the market cuts between them in this valley that seems like it would overgrow yearly if it wasn't for the fact that these people show up weekly for their fruits and vegetables. There's only two things worth getting at a farmers market, I think. Heirloom tomatoes, which are out of season, and something good to eat from a ready food cart. This place has 2, one is a little donut stand with coffee and the other is selling tacos and burritos. I wonder if they serve anything as good as Arturo's.

I get a donut and a coffee and a water that I stick in my back pocket. I'm not wearing a jacket and the wind is really cutting into me so the coffee gives off a nice heat that I'm pretty into. I burn my tongue two or three times just trying to heat myself up a little bit. The market is already winding down when I get there and after a couple other people come through I feel fine lighting a cigarette because all the vendors start packing their shit.

I keep myself walking, now with a cup of coffee sloshing around in my hand spilling occasionally and just generally being a nuisance. I wonder what Roni is doing. I wonder if she cares about me more than the other people that've fucked me. I wonder if I'm wasting my time when I could be getting into Kanaden or finding a passport. I smoke 3 Parchments and walk my way to this corner store to try and get myself some more but they don't sell any so I have to get a pack of Montreal's and settle. 9 even. Damn tobacco taxes.

I need to get something done. There's nothing going on and I'm trying my best but there's nothing going to go on unless I get in a car and get further north. I can't stay here. I'm only a 6 hour drive from Junestadt, it's only a matter of time until someone finds me. I need to get out.

I'm stopped in my tracks with a Monnie hanging out my lip when I see this big mural on the side of a store. It's a .38 special revolver, the kind cops used to carry. I stare at it for a little bit and then I go in the store.

"Hello miss, how are you doing today?"

I knew I fucking passed by the way. I knew it the whole time that bitch Georgina and Mark and whoever the fuck else would treat me like a man. Maybe I have a deep voice but when you see me you have to call me a woman, there's nothing else to say. Fucking bastards. I regret killing Georgina but only because I had to uproot my whole life after doing it. Goddamn it.

"I'm doing good."

"And how can I help you?"

"I'd like to see a revolver."

"A revolver! Great choice. Do you have any thoughts on the caliber or anything like that, you know some of these can get pretty big."

“I want something small, a snub nose. Low range. Just to keep in my purse.”
“Alright, miss, let me see what I have for you.”
I look around the store while he fuffs about looking for the right guns. There’s rifles of all shape and size and type lining the walls. Shotguns and pistols and all sorts of things behind jewel glass or filling boxes in the back, unless those boxes are made, really, out of bullets, box after box of delicious ammunition all courtesy of the army requesting too many be made by the factory and a reduced price for distributors.
He gets out these two guns, they’re both snubnose. He says they’re all chambered for .357 but that they’ll shoot .38 special too, that he recommends it for target practice. I get one that’s gunmetal black and he charges me 430 for it with a box of ammo. Overall, I would say it was a successful trip to the gun store.
I loaded the gun and put it in my purse. In the scouts we learned a little trick that the cowboys would use, they’d only load 5 shots and leave the hammer rest over the empty chamber. This stops them from making a hole in their foot when they feel like walking around with this expensive ass gun that they bought.
Roni’s place is empty when I get there and the door is locked and I just have to go wait I guess. Or I could start hitchhiking my way north like I was planning, or I could steal another car. I’ve been getting better at it. Maybe there’s a back door open somewhere in the city that I can sneak into one of these nights. Maybe I should go find it now.
I look at the door and it comes over me quickly. I’m tired, bruised, broken, exhausted, and I want nothing more but to rest. In bed. By myself. In Kriemhild.
A smile widens across my face. For the first time in so fucking long I know what I want to do. I haven’t felt this way since my mother told me I’d be a terrible hairdresser and I believed her. After all, I didn't even get long hair before, when I was young. I didn’t know anything about it, really.

I break the window to Roni’s apartment. It’s this big wide sheet of glass that stretches its way across the kitchen. It was really kinda beautiful. The rest of my coke is in here, though, stashed under her bed. I don’t know too much what I’m gonna do after this but I write a note.
Dear Roni,

I’m sorry about the window. Here’s some money to replace it. Thanks for putting me up for a couple days but I have to hit the road. I’m kinda on the run. I hope you have a good one thanks for being so nice to me. I wish I could stay. I’m sorry.
Angel Vermouth

I leave 300 on the table with the note and a glass on top to keep everything weighed down. I really do wish that I could stay here. I wish I could be with her forever, just living with her and having fun and going places and being a weird sex freak. It would be fun. I open her fridge and take 3 cans of Coke and put them in my bag for later. Then I do a little money count. I got about 7600 left of 10000. Oh how the money flies away.

I leave out the front door, locking it behind me, and I walk out to the street and catch a bus that seems to be waiting at the stop just to pick me up and me alone. I get on and they start going, it doesn't take long and I'm at a bus station. There's those big interstate buses, the kind that you take and go wherever you want. I get on one to take me to this town called Kassander, it's supposed to be a good place to go for immigration, or at least that's what I've heard.

Part 4: Jump

The bus is huge and gross and nasty as all hell and just sitting in it makes me want a double orchiectomy because there is no way my balls can suck far enough into my body to keep my scrotum from scraping this nasty fucking seat. One way or another I am going to get to Kanaden. I start fantasizing about a man in Kassander, his name is Francois or something gay like that, he sells fake passports. He's my guy. He has blonde hair and a big warm smile that makes you want to talk to him more and more and when you stop you just follow him, you look at him, you want to be why he smiles. I wonder if they're really that hot or if it's just my brain making things up.

I sit and look out the window. It's a 3 hour drive, they say, but it'll be a little longer because they have to stop at 2 cities on the way and there's a block on the road up past Jameson where a bunch of snow has slid off one of the mountain peaks, shivering the road and making it impassable. There we would need to pull off and take a highway around, that's why we have to drive through the second city. We have to drive down to the coast, stay there overnight, and then get back on the bus in the morning to ger to Kassander. The mountains are all I've known these past few days and I can't remember the last time I've seen the ocean.

I watch the trees pass by in their way, zipping like a finger in front of your face, if that finger had needles poked through it every which way making it more and more of a nuisance every time that they want to move it. Amazingly I don't have a very hard time on road trips. There really is enough to look at out the window and I have so much fucking cocaine on me and, best of all, I got a smoking bus. I light a Parchment just to celebrate and start drinking one of the Cokes. The driver is wearing this outfit that looks straight out of the 1960s, almost like a mailman, with this goofy looking hat that just screams "somebody shoot me in the back of the head and do this for me. For a second I consider it, because

man, I think I could drive this fucker a little faster than her no problem. Kinda crazy how slow these trees are passing me.

There's a mother behind me who has a kid and the kid's ears are popping and they hurt really bad but the mom didn't bring any water or gum or anything so the kid is just sitting there whining and crying, you know, the way that they do. It's kinda wild to imagine yourself as a child. When I was a kid they would say I had tits because I was fat and I would take it as an insult. Now if someone so much as acknowledges I have a rack I fall head over heels for them in a second or two.

We come over this little hill and there it is, the coast, all out of nowhere but like it was there the whole time, just waiting for us to come see it. There's these little coastal towns that look so quaint and cute with their little houses all in a row, all different colors with different cars parked in front of them. I look close and I can see all the other cars on this other highway.

I walk up to the front of the bus past this guy who hasn't stopped rambling since we got on. He smells like piss. I ask the driver, "What was this town called again?"

"Johannaberg," she says, "population 50,000. Probably I would stay at the Econolodge, it's the best deal within walking distance of the bus station."

The sun is setting on the west coast and I go back to take up the same seat I was sitting in before and I get this feeling like I've finally made it somewhere nice. I wish I was born in Johannaberg, or Neuberg, or any of these cities. Why did I have to be from the coal and livestock part of Cassandria?

I sit down and start nodding off. I start dreaming about this time when I was a kid and my mom was talking to me about my dad and the way that he yells. She said that if he ever goes too far, if he ever does something to really hurt me, that I had to tell her. She said that it was important. Then my dad told me about something else that he had told my brother before me.

"When you rat on somebody, you are letting a part of your soul die for little more than the feeling that you have done something good, you get it, it's like uh, like with god, god is a good example. Would you rat god out of he said something fucked up or got a little drunk once or twice, or would you let him off the hook? See it's the same thing with me. I deserve a little bit of leniency too. Why shouldn't I? I'm your father you're supposed to love me. Look son, I love you, don't you love me too?"

Then I grabbed his balls and ripped them open and pulled eat one out with my fingernails and put them in his mouth. He keeps on with this screed, all the while his balls are just in his mouth. He says they taste good.

I wake up in the bus because everyone is getting up to leave. There's not many people, and the sun is down by the time we get there. It's a little after 6. I'm very tired. I snort some coke and feel better a little bit but not a lot and start lobbing each foot in front of me and making my way over to the Econolodge that the bus driver told me about. I get in and get myself a room for 23 for the night and I go back outside to find where the room is and it sits there on the third floor and I see it and start

climbing the stairs to get up there. Flight after flight. Seems like forever in the wind and cold blowing off the ocean. In some ways it seemed like the moon was sucking the warmth out of the air, replacing it with this sickly humid haze that covered everything.

I get in the room and I'm feeling ok now. It's warm and the bed is gross but ok for a night and the view isn't terrible. I open the window and have a few cigarettes while they play some rerun cartoons on the TV. They're showing this one show about a dad and his family, and the family is mean to him and the dad is mean back, this is for some reason a cartoon, and it's a comedy. Sometimes I wonder what makes a comedy a comedy and what makes a tragedy a tragedy. Something being funny really just means that it's something that was shocking to hear or to read or understand or however you want to look at it. Then you get these tragikomoedie, dramedies, the middle ground. One scene meant to make you cry sandwiched between a fart joke and a song about the main character's need to please their father. A true tragedy, though, is different, and I understand this. You read a tragedy and it feels like you've been hit by a car, like you have no business having read or understood anything in your vision like you've got to get away from the thoughts that have been implanted in your head by some shadowy master who you follow. A tragedy is traumatic, I think, it hurts you as much as it would if you were the person the tragic shit was happening to. And I don't mean just normal tragedy. I don't care that your parents got divorced. Mine abandoned me. How do you think that fucking felt because newsflash, it wasn't nice. My life is a tragedy, really, it seems to me like a long series of shitty things happening to me and me eventually just giving in and letting them take me.

I smoke another cigarette and get myself to sleep for about 30 minutes but there's something in the air here that makes me want to get up and go walk around at the night. Maybe it was all the bruises rubbing up against me while I was asleep, or maybe it was just the fact that I left the window open and I started dreaming of California.

I decide to walk toward the coast. I snort some more coke and open another one of the Cokes I took from Roni's place. I'm walking along this road and I sip the cola and I think to myself about how I don't know how much I am lovable anymore. I wish I could've been seen off, I wish I would've stuck around, I wish I hadn't broken her window. I regret everything I've ever done in my life. I can't believe I'm this type of person now, who just goes around taking what she wants from whoever she wants and not giving a damn about the consequences because she has a little bit of money that she's playing pretend is more than it really is.

I start to pant because I'm walking so fast and I stop and drink more of the Coke and I really just want a joint even though I haven't thought of it in so long I just want something to make me sleep and I'm so fucking worked up like what the fuck why why am I like this why do I have to be so fucked off right now why am I halfway through this bag of cocaine holy shit halfway! Is there a fucking leak in the bag like goddamn. I need to get my shit together.

The coast is huge. It seems bigger than when I was a kid and we went down to Meattown in the summer to see the waves. There are still waves here, you just wouldn't want to surf them. They're icy cold, you can feel it when they splash your skin a little bit.

I walk along the coast and listen to the chorus to sixteen candles over and over again until I decide that actually I can hardly see enough for this to be worth it and I start the long trek up this long ass hill that I basically jogged down.

This hill is a fucking hike, too. There's all sorts of jagged shit sticking out of the concrete and the way I see it this should all be dug up and replaced as soon as possible before the city gets sued over it. I take longer steps. I was never good at using my full stride. Everyone in my life has always been shorter than me.

At some point I'm walking and I start thinking about Roni again and I just get this terrible pain behind my eye and I have a little moment of panic because it's the fucking brain worm. It's laid eggs and they've hatched and the whole of my brain behind my eyes has been converted into mass for the worms to consume and grow into and they are doing so greedily. This is one of the reasons that I'm so sure that I'm going to die when I'm 25. Better get out of the country so I can see a better doctor for cheaper.

Back in the Econolodge I think about Kanaden and the shit that I know about them. Basically, back in the day they were a German colony and it was like that until they found gold there. Then the Americans came and mined all the gold and make their money and said it was their land and so a war broke out and the Americans won and pushed the rest of Kanaden to north Cassandria and the people that stayed spoke German and a lot of them still do and still call themselves Kanadeners or Kassandern and they still get piss drunk on the worst beer that you've ever tasted in your life. I mean my god and they're proud of it is the worst part. Anyways, they were commies back in the cold war and they didn't really take too kindly to the people coming up and saying that they didn't want to be communist anymore and they ended up dissolving it all pretty messily and the government still hasn't really gotten back on its feet. There's a lot of stories about their mob bosses and maybe if I get established in Kriemhild I'll have to start talking to them all the time or something. Probably not, that's stupid.

The sun comes up and I'm still awake. I check the clock and It's already 8:30 and the sun is finally peaking it's head up over the mountain that I'm about to have someone drive me back up into, the mountain that is covered in snow and all sights of fear and falling that I have now successfully evaded. The mountains Roni lives in. Something calls me away from them but still I light a cigarette and get my ass over to the bus station so I can get back up the mountain and get back to living my life.

The bus comes promptly and there's someone new on it. This girl. She's got a big green canvas jacket over a hoodie, she has the hood done up even though she's sitting in a bus just like the rest of us with heating and cooling and all these things. Anyway I sit sorta by her in case she wants to talk and I try and get some sleep but the sun starts beaming directly in the windshield of the bus and it hurts my eyes

so I start sneaking bumps while the driver gets ready to go. There's about 10 people total on a 40 passenger bus.

This girl comes and sits next to me and she starts leaning on me. She doesn't say much, and she kinda stinks. I wonder where she's from but she just seems like she's gonna pass out on me no matter what I say or do. I let her and the bus starts up and we start wobbling back and forth over every little bump in the road. We get on the highway. This one connects into the other one, the central passage. That's where the biggest road crossing into Kanaden is, about another 200 miles north.

Something about me is impatient, probably just from me doing coke, so I keep fluttering back and forth, looking at this girl on my arm. She looks homeless, or maybe she's just been on the road a long time, her pants and shoes are ratty like she's been walking a lot for a long time and her hair is full of dirt and grime. And I start touching it and it's full of grass clippings and leaves and I start picking them out of her hair while she sleeps on me. I don't know what about me gave her the impression that I'm not the type that would hurt her if she spent some time sleeping on my shoulder but she was right and I just sit there grooming her scalp as she doses and snoozes in the rocking bus.

I light a cigarette and crack the window and like a moth to light she perks up, asking if I have another one that she could have or even if she could just come up and smoke a little bit of the one that I've got going. I give her a Parchment and light it for her and she smokes with me and we use the ashtrays built into the seats to hold the refuse.

"What do they call you?"

"Mary-Jane. What about you?"

"Angel"

"Angel. Are you a dancer Angel?"

"No."

"I used to be a dancer, is the reason I ask. In Kriemhild. I'll tell you something, that place is evil."

She's talking down to me like I'm much younger than her but she's at most 26.

"What happened?"

"I went there with nothing, nothing to my name, nothing but 20 RM and the hope that I could make something of myself. First I lost my money at the tables, then I lost my life wasting away in front of the public for little bank notes folded in half, some American some Kanadener, and I was convinced that I was beautiful.

"There was a man, his name was Tyler, he was American, he said, from Texas, talked in a drawl. Anyway, he looked me up and down and decided that he was interested in me and if I would want to come around his place some time. That was when I made a little change in career, I stopped caring so much about getting the money on stage and more about getting it by the hundred for fucking. This guy, Tyler, he gave me 400 just to suck him off, and another 200 to let him cum in my mouth. So I would

dance until I found a client, right, and then I would take him home and fuck his brains out and get paid good money.

“Well anyway, all sorts of pimps come out of the woodworks to take advantage of a woman making her own way in the world, so they came and I told them all, nicely, that they would not be getting to manage my business, that I had something good going for myself and that I didn’t need any help getting it done. That I would rather just keep the money for myself and not worry about them. Well, that’s the sad thing about protection, it works both ways, so they worked me over one night, had this guy come in and get my attention and hire me and I just went with it because I was used to it, you know? So we get back to his place and he kicks my ass real good and leaves me all broken and bruised and bloody and I swore to god I’d never go back. I haven’t been either, to Kanaden, I mean. I’m just going back up to Kassander to see my family.”

Her story kinda got to me as being a little boring but I made my way through it anyway because it was the first time in however the fuck long that I’ve gotten to worry about someone else’s problems for a change. I tell her that she’s a strong woman and that good things will come and I tamp out my cigarette and light another.

“I been travelling the states since then, just coming back from New Mexico. Some little town called Tijeras. You ever hear of it? Right near Albuquerque, can’t miss it if you’re traveling by car east. It’s the next town, damn straight.”

“And what was there to do there?”

“Oh, uhm, drugs.”

I decide it’s a better idea that I keep my coke put away.

“So you’re from Kanaden?”

“No, I’m from the American side of Kassander. You know, where the people are more free or whatever. What does it say on the sign? That’s the motto right? Where the people are more free? That tracks. I think I’m right on this.”

There’s this big bump in the road and the driver slows down a little bit. I think we’re going 40 in a 55 zone.

“In one way or another, we’re all the same. I’m the same as a pile of cocaine sitting in a stranger’s bag, I’m the same as a weird sort of animal whose snout closes out into this tapered end like a trunk. When I was a kid, they were convinced there was something wrong with me, like there was some kind of innate thing about me that was just off, something that they could just sort of tell even though I was completely none the wiser. I hoped they would find it, I hoped for some kind of answer to what was wrong with me, and it never came. Let me tell you one thing, just for the end of all things or whatever you want to call it: when you’re gone, du bist nur Asch und Bein. Wie Gryphius hat geschrieben. Verstehst du? All that is here today will tomorrow be for naught, all that exists will soon be ash and

soil. We all rot, we all die. Do not kid yourself with notions of grandeur, that you are special. No life is better than another."

Easy for you to say, you haven't killed. I'm sure that she means animals or whatever the fuck anyway. Who cares about it?

"Say can I ask you a question?"

She looks at me wide eyed and says "yes."

"You ever been to New York."

"Never went back east, no."

"I went once, when I was really little, I don't really remember it. I always wished that I could go there again. Let me ask you a question. Do you think I would do good in New York."

"She looks me up and down and she says, "yeah, you seem more like a New York loser than one from around here. But you need darker circles under your eyes first, and you don't smoke fast enough."

"How do you mean?"

"People on the east coast, they live fast, they talk fast, they smoke fast. You gotta suck that fucker down so you can get yourself back fighting the opposing team's fans at the football game go eagles. You think a Brooklynite is taking her time to enjoy a red or do you think she's suckin' down Parchment 100s in 30 seconds flat. Light one now let me see how fast you smoke it."

I light a cigarette and puff it faster than I normally would and I start coughing like I'm in manhattan trying to get this done so I can go back to my job as a stock broker or a hooker or whatever the fuck. I suck it down and cough and cough and this girl, she just starts making fun of me. It was kinda fucked up, I didn't appreciate it.

I put the cigarette out at about the halfway mark and she berates me for it. "Was ein Bitch. Can't even finish her cigarette in 3 minutes, had to put it out. Imagine being like you. Now give me one, let me show you how it's done."

I see now the ruse of asking for a cigarette to show how fast you can smoke it. I let her take advantage of me and hand her a cigarette and she lights it and starts smoking and I swear that it seems like the only thing in the world was this girl and her cigarette. She's staring at it, sucking it with all her might, her lips pressed gracefully but firmly around the full circle, taking in little to no oxygen as she inhales and exhales the thick gray smoke. I watch as she smokes the entire cigarette in only a minute, maybe 2. Who knows. Point is I watched her smoke a cigarette that seemed to me to be a slog to get through. She puts it out in the ashtray and puffs out the last bit of smoke that she has left in her lungs.

"See there, girl, this is how you smoke a cigarette. This is the proper way."

"Maybe some day, for now I'll stick to smoking them slow."

One of the wheels feels like it's wobbling under my ass. I don't mention it. I light another cigarette and try to smoke it the same way that she did. I suck hard enough on the filter that I feel like I'm gonna pop

my teeth out on the suction, the smoke hurts my throat and my lips start getting dry and suddenly I'm halfway through it and I look at her and ash it and she's beaming at me, acting like she really taught me something good. I wonder if this gets you cancer faster too.
"Mary-Jane I got a question for you."
"What's the question?"
"What happens when we die?"
"It depends on what you want to happen when you die, but it's always something ironic. If you expect to go to heaven you go to hell, if you expect to go to hell you'll just see black, if you expect that it's all black then it's all white, if you expect that it's all white then it's all purple, so on and so on for all of time. Death is the ultimate subversion, the biggest way that you can make the government complain about you. You know it's illegal to kill yourself in Cassandria? We live in one of the coldest, windiest, worst places in the entire country and they won't even let us die on our own accord. We get arrested in the afterlife and taken to death prison, that is a prison in hell where you go to prison after you die if you needed to go to prison because of the way you died. What do you think happens when you die?"
"I guess it'll all be red. What does that mean, will it be yellow?"
"No, green."
I roll over to get some sleep with my purse shoved down my jacket sleeve to keep all my shit safe. It's freeing not having a cell phone anymore. I'm glad no one will be calling me.

I wake up in Kassander and I don't have any idea what to do. I can't go to the border because I'm a wanted criminal. I also don't have a passport. I don't really know what I'm gonna do actually. It seems like it's about to get much much colder.
The girl next to me is asleep too and I wake her.
"So where are you going."
"I don't know, I never came this far north before."
"Why don't you come get some dinner with me and my family?"
"Sure, yeah, that would be great."
I start pressing my bag and feeling around and everything is in there. I stand myself up and get moving toward the front of the bus and I make sure to nod and say "thanks" to the driver on my way out.
"Mary, who were you visiting again?"
"My mom and my aunt and my cousins. They're all getting together to eat a big meal for my Aunt's birthday. There's a lot of people coming."
"That'll be cool, how do you like your family."
"I like them plenty, that's not a problem, it just seems like they don't really like me all that much."

I put my head down and listen to the sounds of the street. It's cold for sure, the jacket I'm wearing seems about 5 pounds too light and I need something to heat me up so I convince Mary-Jane to stop in at a coffee house that has steam just pouring out of the front door when it opens. I get myself a nice little cappuccino and I make myself drink it while it's still way too hot because Mary-Jane would really like to get there sooner rather than later and I really have no interest in not listening to her because I think that my plan at this point is probably to try and get myself wedged into her house for a little while until I can get a passport that says the name "Angel Vermouth" and that I was born in Kanaden and that I need to get home because that's what I'm going to tell the guy at the booth when he's asking me all kinds of questions about myself. Also it'll say I'm a cis woman and I'm gonna look fucking hot in the picture.

Mary-Jane's family is big and they all pack themselves into this tiny little apartment in downtown Kassander where Mary's mother lives. She works as a nurse at this hospital about 2 blocks away from her apartment, she walks there to get to shifts. When we go in the door she's there, she introduces herself as Janie-Marie, she has a thick drawl like she's from the south or Louisiana or something. I'm about to ask her about it when one of Mary-Jane's aunts comes up to me and starts telling me about how beautiful I look in my clothes and the way that my hair falls just so into my face and I just start beaming and shaking a little bit and just feeling too much all at once. She gives me a kiss on the cheek right where I was blushing and she just walks off into this thick crowd of party. Mary-Jane takes me by the hand and pulls me to the alcohol cabinet and there's bottles of just about everything but she gets out this shit I've only ever heard of, Kaskaed, Kanadener moonshine. It's syrupy in the jar, clinging the glass with every bit of strength that it can muster, this deep purple and red color that screams at you to drink it, like a bitter elixir from a forest witch with way too much time on his hands. She hands me the jar and at first she expects me to drink the whole thing, about 120 mL of liquor, but I manage to convince her to let me at least try a shot of it before I go chugging a full jar of the shit. She procures a mason jar from the other room with water spots all over it from the sink, she explains that it's not really the kind of house that would have a lot of shot glasses, and she pours me a little from one jar into the other with this intentionality that shows that she has many times dribbled a bit of this god fearing liquid into many a rug and ruined it with deep purple stains that ruin its value. She gets me a little bit in there, not too much, and I drink it down without making a face and it has this burn that I don't think I'm familiar with, like there's just more alcohol than I've ever had in something before. I ask if they make absinthe too and I'm handed the rest of the jar to finish. I decide I can just sip it. Mary-Jane takes me by the hand and takes me to the balcony where people are smoking. There's already 3 people out there, all of them aunts or uncles, all of them smoking red 100s. I light up a cigarette and the other people out there have a bit of a problem with my choice of brand but I assure them that my cigarette brand is a good cigarette brand and that I have no intention of changing it

because I do love the way that they taste, which to me has notes of earthiness, for certain, but also these fruity notes that remind me of a really nice European chocolate. This changes the point of discussion from my cigarette brand to how delicious European chocolate is and how much we all love it, and people start listing off their favorite chocolate bars and I smoke my cigarette and just listen to them. I think about my jacket, I need a thicker one. This one from that box is a little bloody, very dirty, and too damn thin, it might as well just be a canvas t-shirt, especially with the weather going worse and worse with the day. Mary-Jane smokes 3 cigarettes in the time that it takes me to smoke just the one and I find myself looking over at her and being astonished every single time she lights a new one. She lights one as I finish mine and I'm standing there with a slight shiver as the rest of them finish smoking.

Mary-Jane's aunt, whose birthday it is, is sitting inside on the couch. She has a small cohort sitting around her, hearing stories of California. She lives, apparently, in San Francisco, on Nob Hill or something. She's this large woman with a body that rolls over on itself, the thing I'm terrified of becoming should I eat a little more or go on anti-psychotics. I go nearer to her with Mary-Jane and she gives her a big hug and introduces me to her and she's a pretty nice person. She gives me this feeling like I can talk to her without anybody finding out, like everything that we say to each other is a little secret, just between us. This is without me saying anything other than my name, by the way.

"What brings you to Kassander?"

"I hear the winters here are brutal, figured it'd be a good place to be homeless in the winter."

"Ah, another vagrant, no wonder you came here. Tell me, do you often think of yourself as someone outside of society? Or is it just something you do at parties?"

I'm taken aback for a moment. "I don't think that's true, I don't think that I do see myself as outside of society. Just because I'm a vagrant and a freak doesn't mean I don't have a place. I watch the streets, keep crime down, right? That's alright if you ask me, so what I don't spend any money to do it."

"You're not really homeless at all are you?"

"I'm traveling. But no, not really, haven't spent a night outside yet. Hope that doesn't start here."

"You rich? How the hell you just travel without being homeless. You got Mary-Jane here, what are you taking the bus."

"Not rich, just living below my means, you know? That's what my mom always told me, if you live below your means then you'll always be rich."

"What's my name, do you remember?"

"No, what was it?"

"It's Elaine," she says, " you'll do well to remember from now on." She holds out her hand as if I'm going to kiss it so I do. Like a mob boss, is my first thought. My second thought is that she doesn't

talk the way that her sister does, Mary-Jane's mother. She talks like she grew up in the city, like she's from New York or LA or San Francisco, she's got no drawl, she's got no flavor. She doesn't even talk the way Kassanders do, with our weird mix of western slang and eastern accents. She just talks like everybody else.

I wonder if she's ever killed anybody before.

After the party Mary-Jane takes me into her room and fucks me. It's nothing too special, she tops me with a strap and doesn't use nearly enough lube and it kinda hurts just to exist after. In the aftermath we talk and she's locked into the conversation like it's the last one she'll ever have. She looks at me with these ravaging eyes as I describe my journey, lying profusely about the places I've been and the reason why.

The backstory I've come up for myself, as my new identity Angel Vermouth, is that I was working in Erdnussstadt with this pimp that would rent me out pretty cheap to anybody who wanted a piece. He'd put me out for only 15 minutes at a time, and I would get 2 dollars for every trick I turned. Then I decided I didn't like the way he was treating me so I took a gun to his head and said, "daddy, if you don't let me go then you're dead," and I walked right out of there a new woman, with my own life and my own things to do, and I've been traveling the country ever since, working where I can and just riding on some money I got from some of my friends along the way.

This was all fascinating to Mary-Jane, and now she's telling me her story. She spent her first 18 years cooped up in Kassander and couldn't wait to break out. She went to New York first, she lived in some halfway house for addicts but says that she wasn't addicted to anything other than life and cigarettes, so she didn't stay long there, instead she got a job for a little while and lived above it in this little apartment that the manager owned and she made some money there to get her to Pittsburgh, where she worked as a bartender until she was 21 and then she moved herself up to Wisconsin, I think Milwaukee, and started to love the cold again but needed to know what it was like to be in the warm and that's why she's spent the last 5 years traveling the west and going to all places warm that she could manage to find. First she knocked all around California, ignoring the north (sorry Reading), and then went out to the desert to the east of LA. She lived at this weird hippy commune at a dried up salt lake and continued east to Phoenix, where she spent some time learning how to make pottery. Then she went to Santa Fe to learn turquoise and after she learned that it didn't work like that she merely sent for her things from a place by the university in Albuquerque, a neighborhood she called "the Student Slums" although she said she rarely heard any kind of gunshots around there.

Mary-Jane's story wraps up with her coming here for this party. She'll be moving back in with her mother for a little while until she goes off to some other place, she supposes.

Her childhood room is still covered in art peeling off the walls and pictures of her friends from way back then and every once in a while I catch her staring at that wall with all her old friends on it and she gets this starry eyed look like she's about to cry and I can't help but relate to her a bit. When I was a kid I had a lot of friends but when I came out and started transitioning all of a sudden they all dried up. Had a little while of being sad about it but you get over these things, you really do. I'm happier as a woman anyways.

I light a cigarette in Mary-Jane's bed and I smoke it while she looks at the wall and ponders her life for a little while longer. I figure she's probably forgotten I'm here but she takes the cigarette from me and drags it until she tastes the filter and she puts it out in an ashtray on her windowsill. "Angel, did you name yourself or is it short for something."

"My parents named me Angel."

"Did your parents love you?"

"Not really, not when I came out. Then it was all over."

"How old were you when you started working the corner?"

"I was 16. I started because I was homeless."

"A lot of people do that, there's not much else to be done in that kind of situation. You ever run into the law?"

"In Erdnussstadt there really is no law when it comes to the mob. The pimp, I think, either he worked for the mob or he was paying them protection, so he never got fucked with. I think everything like that that happens in the city is controlled my the mob, all the bars and cleaners and anyone German too."

"I mean the mob is in all these cities, right?"

"I heard it's a different mob in Erdnussstadt. The one there is from Kassander but there's a lot of other ones, I heard of one out in Junestadt that's controlled by a bunch of Italians from Meattown. No, just because we call them all the "mob" doesn't mean they're all the same. If I was from Junestadt, I don't think I could've worked the corner, I think I would've been stuck in some jerk off factory behind a bar or a massage parlor or whatever else downtown. Erdnussstadt, it's smaller, but this has worked in the mob's favor there. The police have a small budget, they're easier to control."

Mary-Jane lights a cigarette and then a joint. She doesn't smoke Parchments, she smokes Mailman's. Not the kind of cigarette I expected her to smoke. The package is all blue, all over, and up top it says the name in blue raised letters. There's this panel on the front that's a lighter blue and there's a shot of a mailman with their little carrying bag, holding a cigarette in their right hand, right between their first two fingers. Then she lights a joint. I haven't had weed since I last had a place to live. She smokes a bit of it and hands me the cigarette to puff on in anticipation.

"When was the last time you saw your parents?"

"I think I already told you. I was 16."

"What if they changed their minds?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, what if they really don't hate you like they did? What if it was just anger in the moment? What if they want to see you again?"

"The bridge was burned a long time ago. You don't know what they said to me. It's been years. I'd rather not think that there's more I should be doing for them because I was already so close to just not being a woman for them. I was so close to just making myself the way that they wanted to be. I mean, obviously, right? Just be the way they want me to be because they're my parents, I love them. I never wanted to disappoint them. But then I couldn't help it. They were disappointed in me because I was being myself and I couldn't take that."

"I don't know. My mom wasn't very nice to me the last I saw her. Before I left for New York. Finally I called her from this gas station at the Laguna Pueblo right near this big casino and she picked up and talked and I even called her back collect and she invited me up here and I said I would make it and I did, even if it was just barely, and she's nicer now. She's gotten older and smarter and wiser, she learned from the mistakes she made. At least she can pretend that."

"Look, it's too late now. They wouldn't take me back anyway. Not after what I did."

"Why, what'd you do? Kill someone?"

I shake my head and try to look pissed but really I'm shitting my pants. The worst thing a person can do, something that's supposed to make me feel better about some other shitty thing I did. Yep, I did. I killed 4 people so far and I might have to kill more. Course I'd never admit that.

"Look, can we not talk about my shitty parents or my past or anything anymore."

Mary-Jane nods and passes me the joint. It's already halfway done. I take two hits and cough my lungs up and take the cigarette and drag it to make my lungs feel better. I keep coughing and she pounds on my back a bit before finishing the joint in what I can only describe as record time.

We lay down to go to sleep and my ass is a little sore from the fucking but overall it was a good night. I hope I can get the hell out of this shithole country soon because my mind is going in all sorts of directions while I try and sleep. I'm sure that they've tracked me here, found out my other alias, they know that I killed the guy in the station, the guy I killed by the road, the guy I killed to steal his truck. They know everything and they're just looking for me now. Kassander is the first place I would run to, after all, and this town has been crawling with cops as far as I can tell.

The acting is good enough for her and she apologizes and I say it's ok and that I would just like to go to sleep now. I think about everything I've ever done wrong in my entire life and then I see the eyes of the men I've killed. At least they're all men, I don't think a woman would be dumb enough to get thermselves in a situation where I would need to kill them. They're too smart, men think they can

reason their way out of an insane person but women know that you're on my side, in my way, or out of the way. I think about the ways that I've fucked up my life recently and in the past and before I came out. I think about the teacher I had in 5th grade and the time that she was yelling at me in front of the whole class yet again and I had the gall to ask her "are you my mother," and was sent out of the room. I think of the time that I was at boy scout camp and I lost my virginity to this camp counselor who was maybe 2 or 3 years older than me and how I didn't let him use a condom and that's how I ended up getting chlamydia and how long it took to get rid of it and how much I hated the treatment. Then I think about the time that I was 12 and I went in my mom's room and thought about putting on some of her clothes but didn't because I was too scared of them being angry at me if they came back and I still was wearing them and so I didn't and just looked at her jewelry instead and I stole this pair of earrings and swore that when I got my ears pierced that they would be the first earrings that I would wear but I lost them that same day in my room when I was pretending to wear them and threw them in a pile of junk in my closet when I heard a car door shut particularly hard. I sat down and played some video game I had paused on the TV and when the front door never opened I went back and tried to find them and they were just gone and I think I cried for a while about it but if I did then I don't specifically remember that.

Eventually I go to sleep for a little bit but I wake up about 2 hours later to gunshots nearby. Mary-Jane sleeps right through them and I look out the window down the street and I see them driving off. There's someone laying dead on the side of the road.

I get up out of the bed and make myself use the bathroom even though I really don't have to go. I smoke 3 cigarettes on the toilet and I think about that boy. That boy, and I don't even remember his name or if he even told me his name, but that boy is the one I wish I hadn't killed. He was the only young one, the only one who wanted to help me, the only one who was cute and handsome and who I wanted to take home with me and ride. I could see his body after the crash still, in my head, seeing him reduced infinitely to this morsel of humanity. I turn on their radio and they even have the radioman all the way out here and he's talking about some zoo animal and he doesn't make any mention of me. In fact, being on the run hasn't been anything like I was expecting when I started. I don't know if I'm just really good at it or if cops are actually just incapable of investigating a crime. I smoke another few cigarettes, I'm getting better at it now that Im actually aware that I was doing it wrong, and I listen to some of the music the radioman plays, this early in the morning he says is the power hour, for those early risers and late workers on the move, so he's playing 80s punk and making us all wake up. I decide on coffee.

Mary-Jane's mom, Janie-Marie, is the next to come to the kitchen. I pour her coffee and she asks how the party was for me. She says, "it was pretty much all me, I put up the decorations, invited

all the people, hell that party probably cost me somewhere, oh I don't know, 2, 3 hundred just to put up and you know what my sister has to say? 'thanks'. Yeah sure. Thanks you too."

"It was a good party."

"What'd you like?"

"The decorations were very nice, I liked the way you had the room set up. I would say that you did a great job and if I needed a party I would trust you to be the venue-master."

My answer pleases her and she starts looking me all over and she says, "so you're a dyke too, huh? I don't know why you'd come here, Mary-Jane I understand but you? This place is not very welcoming to the likes of dykes and queers, although this house is. Probably you're running from something. What are you running from?"

I give her the whole spiel that I gave Mary-Jane and she starts shaking her head and stops me. "That kind of story might work on the cops but it won't for me. I see it in your eyes. You're a killer. But you're not gonna kill me. I can see that too. In fact I think you're done with killing, decided it doesn't fit you, decided you don't like it and you're not gonna do it anymore. So now you tell me, and you tell me honest, who'd you kill."

I look at her with these big wide open eyes. The coffee machine starts sputtering and I turn it off so it doesn't burn and I take myself a cup, black, and I start drinking it before it cools and I just choke it down. "I killed my boss, my manager, in Junestadt, place called Popeman's. Shot her dead with 5 wounds, cleaned the blood, tossed her body in the trunk of a car, got released by the cops, burned the body, and ran."

"Cold blooded murder, tell me, you were threatening her, weren't you, and she pushed you. What was such a big deal?"

She was calling the cops. I had about a half pound of cocaine sitting in a quart size freezer bag and she found it. I would be sent to prison, to male prison, because I'm not just a dyke but I'm also transsexual."

"Mmmm, I see now. So you're running to Kriemhild?"

"If I can get a passport."

"That shouldn't be hard at all, no not for a girl like you with your whole life ahead of you. Hell, I'll help you out. You got money or do you need to get a job first."

"I have about 5000 on me."

"I'm assuming you had drugs and money because you were, what, working with the mob?"

"I wasn't, but I think my friend at the time, Mark, I think he was working with them, but he was only selling to pay for art school in Bismuth."

“I’ve heard of that school in Bismuth. They say the light is different there, and every other year, when it comes in just right, it peaks through the clouds and makes these trippy swirls all over like bismuth crystals. I heard that’s what they named the town after.”

“Yeah, that’s all true, but really the whole swirl thing is a little underwhelming, still they have this festival every year to make money, hundreds gathering in a public park to stare up at the sun. Burns out a lot of retinas if you ask me.”

I smoke another cigarette and drink down my coffee until I need another cup, this one I put in with milk so that it doesn’t taste so ass.

I sit back down at the kitchen table, where Janie is sitting and having a little pastry.

“I heard the two of you. You’re a real moaner.”

I don’t think anyone has ever said anything like this to me before in my life. I drink more of my coffee and don’t say anything for a little while but she refuses to speak again until I do so I say, “what about it?”

“You ought to be able to tell when you should keep your voice down, like when you’re in a stranger’s mother’s house for the first time.”

“She wanted me, should I have said no? She wouldn’t have liked that. Besides I need a place to stay.”

“Where’d you and Mary-Jane meet?”

“On the bus ride here, on the second half of it, since they made us take a log way around to get here.”

“What do you think of her?”

“She’s pretty nice, she’s only ever been good to me for certain. She’s strange the same way I’m strange, I feel like.”

“What do you think of her as a person? I’m asking, do you think I did a good job raising her.”

“Well, I guess so, but it seems like she doesn’t like you all too much, not all the way anyways. Hasn’t she been traveling to get away from you?”

“Is your kid liking you the goal of parenting? I don’t think so. I think the point is to make an interesting person, someone who you would’ve been friends with if you weren’t their parent. That’s the goal, you don’t do that by being the kid’s friend, they don’t respond well to that, they become spoiled and snobby and they don’t make friends because their mommy is always breathing down their neck taking the pebbles out of the sand before she jumps off the swings. No. Kids are supposed to get hurt, you’re supposed to grow up knowing pain so when you see others who are having the same pains you can understand what it’s like to be in their shoes, that’s what I taught her. When she said she wanted to leave I welcomed it, I thought to myself, ‘finally, she’s taking some initiative in her own life’.”

"Well, just tell me then, if it's not a problem to you, why do you think that she doesn't like you?"

"Oh, well that's easy. I wasn't very nice to her at all. I was drunk a lot of the time and I was working a lot of the other times, I don't know I was a single mom in the middle of the cold unforgiving mountains, there wasn't really a lot that I could convince myself to do in the order of going above and beyond as a mother. Summers generally looked like me dropping her at the pool or the mall or the roller rink and letting her have at it for a while and then coming back to pick her up around 3 or whenever school would normally get out."

"Let me ask you a question. Do you think I have a good chance? Of skipping the country, I mean."

She looks me up and down, taking a moment to think over whether or not this was something she'd put her money on.

"No."

Mary-Jane is talking to her mother for a long time and the two of them seem to go through the full range of human emotion during this conversation, starting with the two of the laughing and then crying and then yelling before laughing again. All of this I'm hearing from the other side of the front door, which I knocked on but didn't get opened for whatever they're talking about in there, which I assume is about me specifically because if someone is having a conversation in which I cannot hear everything that they are saying I automatically assume that the conversation is one in which I am being joked about and I am at the bottom of all social hierarchies. When they open the door and invite me back inside I realize quickly that the conversation definitely wasn't about me and I definitely need to calm down about how hated I am exactly. I quickly forget this as I sit for a coffee. It's burnt and kinda disgusting but I drink it anyway and I'm grateful for it because I'm exhausted. After my little talk with Janie-Marie this morning I couldn't get back to sleep so I went around and smoked in the cold until I felt like it was a good time to come back, which is a time I don't know because I haven't seen a clock in a long time.

"You look like you froze out there."

I don't feel very cold, mostly just in my nose and my hands and my cheeks, but I guess those are the places where you would get the coldest the fastest. I pick up the coffee, "it's a chilly morning for sure."

"You feeling any better? You looked pretty shaken up when you left."

"I was looking for god out there for a little while, you know, big guy in the clouds. I never really believed in him but I decided, fuck it, might as well find god since I'm all the way up here in Kassander, might as well find a reason to believe him, but I walk around and I walk around and I'm

just looking, right, and I can't find the fucker anywhere. He ain't looking down on me from the clouds and he ain't helping anyone down there and he really just ain't doing shit is he. I was watching this person get taken by stretcher into an ambulance and he was dying of frostbite in his foot, I guess it got too wet in his socks and decided it was gonna freeze itself off," I stop and blow my nose for a little while, making my nose sting and clog in a different way than it was before, "the doctors, they were saying that there was a chance they would be able to save the leg, they said this just in front of him like he wasn't there, like he wasn't hearing the worst news anybody can every hear, just because they found him on the side of the road, and I got to thinking to myself, was it god who gave me the ability to live by myself and to travel like this, or was it really the devil, because the devil seems like he would like drug money a lot more and would seem like he would want to set me up to do what I'm going to do in my life and I wonder, I just do, is the devil actually maybe a little better than god, because god hasn't done shit for me as far as I can tell, but the devil, he's done more than I could ever see."

"Tell me something would you?" Mary-Jane asks me, "What the fuck are you talking about?"

I light a cigarette. "I really don't know. I just saw some bad things out there and I wish I hadn't've."

"Angel, you ever do any art?" Janie-Marie is a stupid name for someone.

"No."

I drink the coffee down black and ask for another cup. The kitchen is small, I don't know exactly how they were able to fit an entire party in such a small house. Janie-Marie gives me another cup of coffee and I ask, "what were you guys talking about?"

"Nothing too much," Mary-Jane tells me, "I have a friend that can probably help you get a fake passport to take north. The new government, they're fascistic in their economy, but you're white and clear skinned so I'm sure they won't give you any hassle. Now look, it's about your voice. You cannot go through that border sounding so much like a tranny."

This conversation I've had with myself many a time. I've done what I feel is all I can to get better at speaking like a woman.

"Now you tell me, are there other trannies in Junestadt? Did nobody teach you the proper way to speak?"

"I was the only one I knew of."

"I know some of the local transsexuals. You can go talk to them about voice training, that's what they call it. They stay at a bar across town, a place they call "The Bottom". It's a gay bar, they like to hand around the back. Stay away from the toilet stalls, they have these glory holes drilled into them, they like to stick their limp little girldicks in your face while you're trying to take a piss."

"You want me to go to a bar to learn how to talk like a girl?"

“I don’t know another place that they congregate and I’m going to be a terrible teacher if I have to explain it all to you. Tell me something, have you ever considered making yourself drink more water?”

“No, look, I don’t even know if it’s possible,” I put on my breathiest, brightest head voice that I could come up with and say, “I can barely even talk like this. Really it’s the cigarettes, my throat hurts most of the time.”

“I smoke too, you know. We both do, you just need to worry less about what you’re saying and more about what you sound like, and if you go see those transsexuals in that bar then I guarantee that you’ll be able to speak like a woman.”

This is an incredibly boring conversation for me, and I wish nothing more than that it should stop and I be allowed to go snort some cocaine. I’m starting to run out and really I need to before I get to the border, the fascists aren’t a fan of people smuggling so many drugs into their country. There’s about 3 ounces left, enough to kill a bear I’m sure, assuming the purity is there, which honestly with Mark, who knows? I sip this glass of water that at some point Mary-Jane had put down on the side table by me.

“Whatever, can I go to this bar now? Or do I have to wait.”

Like all good things this one needed some time to come to fruition. I open up a new tin of coffee in Janie-Marie’s kitchen and start mixing it and I put a scoop of the grounds into this percolator pot that she has sitting ever so commanding on the stove top, ready to be used at any old moment. I feel like a used up old housewife making a cup of joe for her husband before he goes off to work, but I made the coffee and drank it for about the next 5 hours, running through about 2 packs give or take a few ciggies during this course.

During this I was accompanied by Mary-Jane. “How does it feel having all your agency stripped from you, to be treated like a cog in someone else’s machine? Is this a normal feeling for you, do you feel it often? Do you often feel like a caged dog, chomping at the bit, waiting to get out so you can gut the fucker who imprisoned you in the first place? Or do you just wear it on your face?”

All of these questions pissed me off, and I hate the way that these fucks talk to me quite frankly, but I think people from Kassander are just kinda assholes like that. Mary-Jane does seem to trigger something in me that I can’t quite explain, like I’m being told something that should only be told to god, like I am capable of understanding the way that people work and their machinations, like I can help her. I don’t know that anyone can help Mary-Jane. I think she’s been taken over by whatever drug and made into this wet pile of psychodribble. I can’t help but feel bad for her, although the feeling is quickly replaced by me feeling more sorry for myself. Mary-Jane is the kind of girl I would take up arms for if she asked me to, like she’s got this truth that doesn’t make any sense but you can tell that she really believes it and she’s beautiful enough that you can convince yourself she’s a goddess.

The sun starts to go down about 5:30, it's a dark night and the sun is sure to show you this with as little effort on your part as possible, almost as if the dark would replace the light even in places where it didn't make sense, the shadows being these real moving figures, like looming people of great height coming out of the corners and taking away the daytime. I'm terrified. It's time to go to the bar.

My passport says that I'm 22 years old, my name is Angel Vermouth, I'm a dancer and I'm from Kriemhild, Kassander Nord. I live at 2121 Piedmont Avenue and I have a boyfriend and a pimp who's waiting for me to get back so we can start making money again. This is, of course, perfectly legal in Kriemhild, the so called "City of Lustful Desires" where idiot Americans come to make themselves look like idiots and lose all their money to a slot machine of all things. I love Kriemhild and I only ever came to America because of my mother, who was dying in a hospital in Texas. I've come a long way and I'd like to go home.

The trannies at the bar were alright, they didn't say there was too much left for me to do. One of them, Brunhilde, is walking me back to Janie-Marie's place over on Green Yonder Street. It's strange the way that even a town like this with only 20 or 30 thousand people have these built up downtown areas, seemingly empty compared to another, more dense downtown. The apartment that Mary Jane and her mom live in takes up about half a floor in their building, the other side of the floor being the B side and theirs being the A side. They shared this floor for the past 22 years, it would seem.

This girl, Brunhilde, she named herself this because of the strength that Brunhilde had in Der Nibelungen. I figured that I've really never picked a name that I wanted before I chose the name Angel. Before that I just picked Louise because it was something popular at the time, there was a member of Major Comet called Louise and she was beautiful and I wanted to be like her. I tell her, "I think the name Angel just suits me, it's the kind of name that really shows people your innocence."

"You're right, Angel fits you. What's your last name?"

"Vermouth."

"Vermouth as a last name. You picked that too didn't you. Goddamn that's just nice, I love it. Reminds me of a girl I met up in Kriemhild, this dancer, she would get all this money from all these men that wanted to get in her pants and she'd come home with all these gifts for me. I think her name was, uhh. Oh god, you know, I think her name was Angel too. Come to think of it, half the city up there is named Angel, at least all the streetwalkers and the dancers."

"So I'll fit right in, you mean."

"Yeah, you should be a regular see you next Tuesday."

We're crossing the street at Journey and Wurst and this car doesn't stop and it hits me and knocks me to the ground. I'm bleeding road rash on my ass my hands and I'm shaking a lot and breathing heavily when I land down and skid over the length of my exit path and there's this clear trail of blood leading up to me about 4 feet from where I got hit by the car. I light a cigarette and there's this

ringing in my ears as I sit patiently on the street for the car to come and finish me off right then and there. Brunhilde is screaming at the driver, her muscles bulging out from their own skin and she walks up to the car window where the person is and she starts tearing them apart, verbally of course, sticking her finger in their face and yelling. I manage to get myself back up on my feet and my hip hurts like a motherfucker but I should be ok once I get a good deal of sleep and ice water.

The car drives off and Brunhilde helps limp me back up to the apartment and then she helps me lug myself up two flights of stairs and knocks on the door for me so I don't get blood all over it.

"Brunhilde! What the fuck happened!?" Janie-Marie is motherly if nothing else. I light another cigarette.

"Some asshole fuckin ran her over in the middle of the street and drove off."

"Shit ass, motherfucker, my girl look what they did to her."

Mary-Jane is nowhere to be seen. She must be out.

Janie-Marie starts running me a cold shower and I get in and the water stings all across my ass and my hands and I just cry as the water rinses all the grease and nasty shit from the road. Somehow this is what I imagine it feels to get shot. I feel like I'm outside of my body, living in some storybook on a shitty little kids desk that he won't read even though it's his homework to read it and get it done before Tuesday and he knows that but he just doesn't do it anyway. Or her.

The rash feels hot and the cuts all over look like spider webs when I look at them in the mirror. I enter this dreamlike state. I see myself dry off the blood all over my ass and then proceed to stand patiently, like a good girl, while Janie-Marie individually butterfly bandages every cut on my ass until they're all covered up good. Then she wraps my whole ass and cock and balls in this fucking huge bandage and she does this, I feel like, too tight. There's this overall feeling that I need a fucking drink so I ask for something and she pours me this vodka cran that's like 50/50 vodka to cran with no fucking ice and it tastes disgusting and there's so much of it so I just chug it all down really fast and try and not make a face while I do this. Then I go and lay face down in Mary-Jane's bed with my palms facing the sun and sleep. Nothing gets you more exhausted than getting injured, but I can't really sleep until Mary-Jane gets back.

When I'm laying in bed the next morning I wonder to myself if there's really all this much to life. I could've died the other night. I could be dead now, not recovering but dead. And this is all over a life that has fought. I have fucking earned the right to live more than anybody probably in the state. I have killed to survive, not many can say that. And yes, I regret it a bit, but I would do anything to live. I need to stay alive, it's all I have anymore is my life. There's nothing else to lose in the whole world but your life, that's what I've learned. You can kill off every other fucker around and fuck over whoever and make yourself scarce afterward and none of that will matter really as long as you hold on to what's

yours, your life. That's what matters, it matters more that you stay alive even than someone else. If someone is trying to snitch on you, or if they're dumb enough… I MEAN I SWEAR TO FUCKING GOD GEORGINA, I AM POINTING A GUN AT YOU, HOW DARE YOU FUCKING DEFY ME YOU DUMB FREAK BITCH. HOLY SHIT. The nerve of some people.

Mary-Jane comes into the room and she has this look on her face like she's getting ready to bullshit me and she asks "How are you feeling today, Angel?"

"I'm ok, I've just been lying here. I read this book you had on your nightstand. Some of it at least."

"Oh yeah, The Princess of Haulfberd, what did you think of it?"

"I like it, I only got up to the part where the princess makes it out of her tower, you know, after she convinces the dragon to lay down their arms and succumb to the knight.

"Well anyway, the dragon is reluctant, the dragon sees it as it's protecting the princess from any would be neerdowells that would come to rough her up or rob her, and she doesn't understand this but she still allows the dragon to believe that its duty was useful, that its life and time was frugally spent, and that it should rest, but even still the dragon won't rest.

"She takes the dragon by the ears and yells a mighty yell, the kind of yell that one only really gets after years of being the most important person in the realm, a screech for the ages, and she says 'dragon, you are my servant, and I am commanding you to die' and there's this moment where the dragon doesn't understand, where it bumbles around trying to find some way around its fate, but the fact is that the princess has deemed that the dragon should die, and so the dragon must die, either by its own hand, or as an outlaw, and not wanting to feel the shame of being an outlaw it follows the order, it kills itself in the same fiery pits in which it had killed and maimed so many an adventurer before.

"And I wondered while I was reading it, because I'm sure by now you know that I'm a killer, it seems like it's just something I am, I wonder if the state or if anybody really is just waiting on me to kill myself. I wonder if really the radio man and everyone else is just waiting for the day when my body will wind up being found in some awful gutter in one of these northern cities or villages, the day that I'm discovered to be a transsexual by one of my partners and I'm found by the side of the highway, some bullshit story about a freak mishap with a hubcap and a tire change."

Mary-Jane looks at me for a second and sits on the edge of the bed. "Angel, I wanna know something. You ever think about killing me?"

"Why would I want to kill you?"

"What about my mama?"

"No, no of course not I-"

"No, Angel, because you aren't a killer, you aren't some serial murderer going across the countryside. People make mistakes, sometimes people do things for irrational reasons, and sometimes

the things that a person does make perfect sense in the moment. Sometimes things just don't go the way they were supposed to. That's life."

"But no, that's death, really. Look, I've killed four people now, and I know for a fact that it's not because of some innate need to kill but Mary-Jane, I gotta tell you, it was fun, it was a rush, and when I was done doing it I burned up the bodies and watched them while they went. And that was fun too, because I got to be firm, I got to understand that I was stronger than them and that they were an idiot for thinking they could fucking defy me. And now I'm here, and I read this story, and I realize something. I'm not strong. I'm not stronger than any of these people. I think they just didn't realize the stakes, they didn't get that I was going to kill them if they didn't comply, they didn't think that it was possible that they would be the person being shot or strangled or beaten to death in the dark. And there's a part of me, Mary Jane, that tells me that it's true. I shouldn't be here. But I feel like now more than ever I have to live, for those who I killed to be able to keep living. I have to make it to Kriemhild. Look, I get that my ass is gonna hurt still, but I'm leaving first thing in the morning, you get it?"

"The rains are coming back, they're freezing. Have you ever stood in freezing rain naked, Angel?"

"Why would I do that?"

"It's cold."

"I would guess so."

Mary-Jane nods knowingly and leaves the room. I swear to god half that girl's brains leaked out of her head somewhere in California.

I lay in that bed, waiting for something to happen, when I hear the most peculiar sound. This pounding on the door. I jump up. I know exactly who it is. The cops found me. I need to get out. Fuck. I need to get out. I get up, moving the bandages uncomfortably all over my ass, and I lock the bedroom door. I light a cigarette and one of the joints that sits half smoked in Mary-Jane's ashtray. Then I snort 4 or 5 bumps of coke out of my fist and then I hear pounding on the bedroom door.

"Robert, this is Sheriff Schroeter, I work here in Kassander County and I would like to have a few words with you about what happened back in Junestadt."

I open the window and hang the cigarette out of my mouth. It's a 3 story drop down. I take it. I hurt my ankle pretty bad.

I limp myself up on my injured naked ass and just like Mary-Jane said it's raining this freezing cold rain. I can feel it tightening all my cuts and problems and I feel myself get worse and worse as I limp along but I feel the sights of a deputy's revolver trained on my back and know for a fact I'm going to a male prison. I turn quick, my fingers holding an imaginary gun of my own that I point at the cop. He fires once and there's a bullet in my stomach, then he fires again and there's a bullet in my arm. I

land on the ground, groaning in pain and I start to see this great white light and it eats my vision starting in from the top and working its way down until eventually I can’t see anymore.